

HYMNS: **378** “Father of everlasting grace”
 154 “Come, divine Interpreter”
 408 “How small a spark has lit a living fire”
 94 “To God be the glory, great things he has done”

READINGS: Acts 2:1-21
 Mark 12:28-34

“WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?”

The flickering of a flame, the warming of a heart, the movement of a rushing mighty wind; what does this mean?

The freeing of tongues, the renewing of lives, the changing of worlds; what does it mean?

The quickening which we need, the spirit which we seek, the holiness which we inherit.....What does this mean?

We meet today to celebrate and remember the extraordinary event that brought the church into being. The disciples of Jesus were all met together in one place as we are, ordinary folk, as we are, awaiting they knew not what, when suddenly the Holy Spirit came upon them and they were transformed.

And the people who saw them asked that same question: ‘What does this mean?’

A thought and then an image:

‘Pentecost is not a time of completion. It is a moving forward into new dimensions of being, whose basic forms are clear, but whose fulfilment has yet to be realised.’

If you travel westwards from the small fishing village of Sesimbra near Lisbon in Portugal after a while you find that the road peters out into a small track that wends its way for some distance through scrubland and past small houses. The way is marked from time to time by signs which bear the sign of a cross, but no wording, so that you know that wherever you are going, although it is a mystery, it is something to do with the faith.

Eventually you come to a large standing cross, 3-4 metres tall, and the trackway widens out to a huge piazza, dominated on one side by a large church painted in

white and decorated with carvings and a rich and ornate facade. Along two sides of the piazza are colonnades; rows of archways which appear to front rows of terraced buildings whose purpose is unclear.

Inside the church it is cool and dark. As your eyes get used to the darkness, you can make out the flicker of candle flames beneath the pictures of the saints which adorn the walls, but there are few people here, just the odd tourist like you, wondering at the origins of this great building. Birds are nesting in the rafters, and they flutter around the roof space, and occasionally swooping out through the doors and broken window panes, to what is beyond.

Following them, you go past the altar, and out through the back door, and stop short with astonishment. You suddenly find yourself on top of a cliff, perilously near the cliff edge. A risky place! Below you powerful Atlantic waves beat the coastline with relentless ferocity. All around you are buffeted by strong gales and gusts from all directions, so that you can barely stand. Ahead, the horizon glows gold with the colours of the late afternoon sun.

This is a liminal place, where one reality melds into another; land into sea, sea into sky; and all is energy; light; gravity; wind and tides. And transformation: energy into substance, substance into energy continually making and re-making new patterns and new realities.

The Hebrew people placed the Holy Spirit at such an interface. Genesis records the moments of creation as the Spirit broods over the chaos of the waters, ever bringing forth new dimensions of being, whose basic forms are clear, but whose fulfilment has yet to be realised.

This same spirit has brought new vitality and direction to many throughout the ages, including a young Anglican clergyman who on this day in the year 1738 was also in a gathering of the faithful who were studying the scriptures, and famously felt his heart strangely warmed and his life and faith transformed. His name was John Wesley, without whose conversion and commitment we would not be here today; this building would not be here and we would not be here to fill it.

It turns out that the church at Cabo Espichel was built in 1715, after one man, a near contemporary of Wesley, had received a vision of the virgin Mary, and was dedicated

to Nossa Senora da Cabo, or our Lady of the Cape. During the 18th and 19th centuries this was a very popular destination for pilgrimages. But there is little now that remains to memory.

The mysterious colonnaded buildings were dwellings for the pilgrims -but no more. They are all empty, but so well preserved in the dry atmosphere that it seems as if the pilgrims had left only yesterday and you can almost hear the conversation and the laughter, the activity of cooking in the piazza, and the chanting of prayers in the cool of the great basilica. And you wonder what happened, and where it all went wrong.

But that is not the question we should be asking!

The question we should be asking is: What does this mean?

Hold, for a moment, that image of the great edifice existing right alongside the risky, liminal place of constant creating energies.

The Christian faith, begun on that first Pentecost, has undergone many changes and variations in the intervening years; denominations have arisen and fallen, buildings have been erected and demolished, leaders, movements, spiritualities and theologies have been constructed and come and gone. And those that have changed and developed or gone completely have not necessarily done so because they were wrong, but because they were human, time bound and culturally shaped, as we are.

My favourite quote on this comes from CS Lewis:

What are we, human beings?

Five senses, an incurably abstract intellect,

a haphazardly selective memory,

a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that we can never examine more than a minority of them,

and never become conscious of them all.

How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?

The 18th century world to which Cabo Espichel belonged and to which Wesley belonged would have been unrecognisable to the first century apostles; I dare say

Methodism would be, too. Equally our 21st century, multi-cultural, computerised, post-Darwinian, post-Big Bang society would be completely alien to Wesley.

Today we build the constructs of our faith as people of our time and place. As will those who come after us.

Our calling, as we worship on this historic day in this historic place is not to seek to preserve the past, but, building upon its heritage, to await the energy of the ever-creative spirit, which is alongside us.

Pentecost is not a time of completion. It is a moving forward into new dimensions of being, whose basic forms are clear, but whose fulfilment has yet to be realised.'

We wait, as those first apostles, gathered together in one place for the quickening which we need, the spirit which we seek, the holiness which we inherit, by the freeing of tongues, the renewing of lives, the changing of worlds, in

the flickering of a flame, the warming of a heart, the movement of a rushing mighty wind.

Amen