

“A community of prophets” a sermon based on Acts 2:1-21 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 9 June 2019, Pentecost Sunday, by Kerry Enright.

Acts 2:17, 18: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. ... Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

This is a sermon about a sermon preached to a sneering crowd. At the time Acts was written, the early church was already beset with internal tussles with resulting uncertainty about itself as an instrument of the God of Israel. With conflict so early on in its life, with so little interest from the wider Jewish movement, with so much opposition from the authorities, with sneering from the populous, the early church was already shaken.

So Luke wrote a book about how God is active in the church and in the world - the book of Acts. And near its beginning is this sermon, outlining what faithful preaching sounds like. The sermon reflects what the church was teaching in the early decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Let's be clear - it isn't verbatim. Luke wasn't there. It's a best guess, a typical speech and it became a template for the early church.

To hearten the church, the sermon reminds the people who they are as a church and what the church is for. It reaches back into their history to a role they knew, and it applies that role to them, the role of prophet. It uses words of Joel to tell them that they are a community of prophets, fulfilling what Joel foretold.

Except Joel didn't exactly say that. The sermon takes the words of Joel and reshapes them to make a point. You shall prophesy – it says: sons and daughters, young and old, slaves and free, women and men. Everyone. The 120 or so had been in the room.

They were people from Galilee, a rural backwater in the minds of Jerusalemites and in the minds of the diaspora Jews whose means allowed them to travel to Jerusalem for the Feast of Shavuot. Galileans spoke with a distinctive accent that this cosmopolitan crowd would notice and likely scorn. The sermon is saying that even yokels from Galilee could be prophets.

Later in Acts, Luke names others as prophets: apostles like Paul and Peter, Ananias, Philip's four daughters and Agabus, the unnamed people who will take the gospel "to the ends of the earth", even slaves, the lowest in the household, are claimed by God.

The words of Joel are reworked because the preacher wants every believer, every follower, to see themselves as part of the community of prophets. The words of Joel are reworked because the preacher wants you to see yourself as part of a community of prophets.

The one who constitutes this group as a community of prophets is the Holy Spirit. God's own Spirit joins you into the community of truth-tellers. The Holy Spirit came upon each of them, like fire, with tongues, to speak truth in the public square.

In the public square because the world needs saving. In the public square because God doesn't want the world to go to hell. In the public square, because the gift of the Spirit with us is a sign of God's intent to reclaim not just the church but the world. In the public square, because the church is about making sense of the world in terms of faith, for the sake of the world.

The people felt that these were last days. But there was to be a God-given turning point, a new age. A new age where everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, shall know life in fulness.

The truth-teller points to the new age as Jesus did. So it's no wonder that the rest of Acts is filled with confrontations and showdowns with rulers and authorities, because the people of Jesus seek to proclaim a new age that inevitably judges the present one.

Here we are then - a sermon was strengthening the nerve of the church by reminding it of who it was and what it was for - to confront the principalities and powers, to transform the world by faith in Christ, to point to the new age and be ready to face the suffering that would result. The sermon uses images from the past to understand the present and point to the future. It looks beyond the moment, the experience, the feeling, to say – this is what is really going on.

The great US preacher, William Barber, highlights the re-emerging signs of racism in his nation. And he challenges those who say – this is unprecedented. “Really?” he asks. “Don’t you remember?” And reaching into their history he finds example after example of when they have been here before. And then, with dramatic voice he says - This is that! This is that! What is happening now, happened then, and then, and then. That’s what a prophet does.

And he delves into scripture and theology and the history of the church to highlight how our forbears met the challenge of their times and the resources we have for our time. That’s what a prophet does.

But he goes further and says that what we need in our time is a new moral Pentecost, a new fire, a new tongue because the present language isn’t big enough, the language that divides and minimises. He says the language of left and right, Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative – this language is not big enough for the challenges we face.

We need a new Pentecost. Pentecost isn’t once and for all, for then and there – six times in the book of Acts we see the Spirit mobilising followers, awakening their imaginations, dragging believers towards the new age.

And what a diverse group of listeners. Consider those who heard that sermon. The Elamites, a people nearly wiped out by the Assyrians in 640 B.C.E. The Medes, a distinct ethnic group that been extinct for over five-hundred years! As if the sermon was saying – even tribes eradicated and decimated and obliterated will share in the new age, so don’t forget them. Remember what happened to them. They are part of us.

And there were ten other tribes, totalling twelve. When we hear “twelve tribes”, it represents inclusion – all the people. God's Spirit shall be poured out upon *all flesh*.

So here is a sermon, strengthening the nerve of the church by proclaiming what it is and what it is for. Proclaiming - which puts it beyond opinion or suggestion or self-definition. God tells us through Bible and theology, through proclamation and reflection: We are a community of truth-tellers, to discern what God is doing and to speak that truth in the public square, for the sake of the world.

For which the Holy Spirit keeps giving us new fire and fresh tongues. That's why some of our people protested outside the Town Hall last week. That's why last Sunday's sermon reminded the University what wisdom meant. That's why, counter-culturally, we worship, because we are not consumers or economic units or pawns of the powerful or tools of any section of society.

God makes us a community of truth-tellers.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN *called to be a community following Jesus*



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net