

Kingdom (*Chap 37, Searching for Sunday*) – Acts 2:1-21

Well, I think we need some kind of a drum roll.... Today we have reached the end of our series on *Searching for Sunday*!

For the past five months, with author Rachel Held Evans, we have explored what faith, following Jesus, is like through the themes of *baptism, confession, holy orders, communion, confirmation, anointing the sick and marriage* (Penny's great sermon two weeks ago!), and so the question we might ask now is having searched for Sunday, for resurrection and new life, the joy and justice of God's kingdom, have we found it? Yes...? No...? Yes and no? Yes, but we're not there yet?

Earlier in this book, in the section on the sacrament of confession, Evans writes a very charged litany of the deeds of the church, remembering:

- The Christian crusaders who on the 15th July 1099 slaughtered the Arab inhabitants of Jerusalem, burning the Jews of the city in their synagogue.
- The centuries of persecution in Europe of different groups of people, many of them women accused of witchcraft.
- The Puritans in America who wiped out the Pequot tribe in 1637 with Captain John Underhill explaining, *"Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents... We have sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings."*
- The European conquests which enslaved or killed hundreds of thousands of first nations people. Evans tells of a chief from the island of Hispaniola (the Dominican Republic and Haiti today) who when offered the chance to convert to Christianity before execution said that if heaven was where Christians went after death, he'd rather go to hell.
- The way American ministers defended the institution of slavery. *"Your cause,"* Methodist pastor J. W. Ticker said in 1862, *"is the cause of God... [this] is a conflict of truth...of the Bible...of pure Christianity with Northern fanaticism."* How, 100 years later, Bob Jones University upheld a ban on interracial dating saying, *"The Bible clearly teaches, starting in...Genesis...the differences God has put among people on the earth..."*

"Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy," she writes. And then she remembers:

- Ambrose who defied the empire, blocking the door of his church until Emperor Theodosius repented of his violence.
- John Hus, and we could add the first Baptist leader, Thomas Helwys, killed for obeying their conscience, for religious freedom.
- Theresa of Avila who overcame opposition to advance swooping monastic reforms.

- William Wilberforce who channelled his evangelical fervour into abolishing slavery in the British Empire, vowing *“Never, never will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal from the Christian name.”*
- American Sojourner Truth who escaped from slavery, was the first black woman to win a court case to recover her son from a white man, and was an Abolitionist, and activist for Afro-American rights and women’s rights and temperance.
- Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan friar, who volunteered to die in the place of a Jewish stranger at Auschwitz.
- The men and women, black and white, who marched with Martin Luther King Jr.

For all these, Evans writes, *“We give thanks.”*

There is so much church history, since the inception of the church here in Acts chapter 2 that we deeply grieve, and there are also moments we celebrate and cling to because these moments, these examples of faith, of Christian witness and Christian community, are signs of the kingdom of God.

“The church,” Evans writes, *“is not the same as the kingdom... The purpose of the church... is to give the world a glimpse of the kingdom, to point in its direction.”*

We are not there yet, but we are a sign – a sign of the kingdom of God.

Pentecost then is not about the birth of the church, as though the church is what the mission of God is all about, but about the empowering of the church, of the people who love and follow Jesus, to continue Jesus’ ministry, bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, proclaiming – pointing towards - the kingdom of God.

And in this account in Acts, this empowering is a big deal.

The believers - a group of around 120 people (Acts 1:15) - are together for Pentecost - the feast of bringing the first fruits of the harvest to God - when *“suddenly... there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind”*. As New Testament Professor Margaret Aymer writes, *“This is no gentle in-breaking. The Spirit comes suddenly (aphno), even violently (biaias), upon the gathered.”* Then tongues of fire appear and they begin to speak in other languages!

Hearing the noise and commotion, a crowd of Jewish converts from *“every nation under heaven”*, we are told, gathers and is *“amazed and astonished”*. This is not a pleasurable amazement, Aymer writes, but a crowd deeply disturbed by what they are hearing. *“What does this mean?”* they ask. *“How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language... [ordinary people] speaking about God’s deeds of power.”*

The terrifying nature of this event is reminiscent of God giving the law to Moses in Exodus (Exodus 19) where we're told, *"Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire, the smoke went up like the smoke a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently."* And the voice of God speaking to Moses was like thunder.

And when Peter speaks to the crowd he draws on other dramatic imagery from the prophet Joel when signs of God's coming into the world include blood, fire, and smoke, lunar and solar eclipses.

The empowering of God's people to continue God's work is a big deal. It is a radical redirection of our lives in the direction and in the way of God's kingdom. As the sign says, the road is closed to your normal way of life. And the wonderful news heralded by the sound and fury and multilingual translation of Pentecost is that this radical redirection is now open to everyone. For now, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

The radical redirection of the Christian community in Acts is immediately illustrated in ways that continue to 'amaze and astonish' (and unsettle) us with radical generosity, radical compassion (as Melissa touched on last week) and radical commonality. Acts 2:43-45, *"Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common... [sharing] to all, as any had need."* And Acts 4:33-34, *"With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them..."*

These were the signs and wonders of people who were signs of the kingdom of God.

But just as God's kingdom breaking in is a big deal, the equally amazing and astonishing thing is this kingdom begins and grows as the Holy Spirit is poured out on small, ordinary people.

"In the last days..., God declares...I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." The word for sons here (*uioi*) could be used for children of either gender, but the passage deliberately names daughters. Therefore, *"we can take this to mean,"* New Testament scholar Jeremy Williams says, *"that all (with an emphasis on all) genders have access to the pouring out of God's Spirit."* And the pouring out also doesn't discriminate by age. *"Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams."* And the pouring out also includes those who are most powerless in this society or in any society today. *"Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."*

I have been thinking a lot this week of the two small and ordinary people who Melissa told us about last Sunday.

Ten-year-old Anunita whose life has been transformed – radically reoriented – from lying in bed all day every day to having therapy that has enabled her to walk, to be part of the life and work of her family and community and to go to school! This is a sign of the breaking in of the kingdom of God! Of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit!

And also thirty-four-year-old Amala, a woman with a physical disability from childhood polio who was divorced by her husband and considered worthless, but who through this program, *'Improving the lives of people with disabilities in Bangladesh'* has discovered that people with disabilities have rights, has received therapy and livelihood support and now is part of a goat rearing enterprise that supports her family, is active in community life and has even been elected president of her self-help group. How this woman when asked if her story and her picture could be shared, said no, I don't want my picture shares, but yes, I am happy for my story to be told. This is a sign of the breaking in of the kingdom of God! Of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit!

And I have been thinking about all of us, small and ordinary people, on whom the Holy Spirit has been poured, and whose acts of generosity and compassion and friendship and justice and courage and inclusion and welcome and love are signs pointing in the direction of God's kingdom.

It's a big deal and it starts with small ordinary people. And we are not there yet, but we are signs that the kingdom of God is on the way.

Let us sing – and the choir will lead us – *Holy Spirit, living breath of God, breathe new life into our willing souls. Bring the presence of the risen Christ, to renew our hearts and make us whole...*