

Pentecost Sunday, 28th May 2023
Kilmore Cathedral
Service to mark 10 years of Bishop Ferran Glenfield

Readings

Acts 2: 1-21

Exodus 33: 12-23

Well, good afternoon. A pleasure to be here and let me begin with the customary greeting of wishing you all a very Merry Christmas and of course a Happy New Year! Though I have to say that with this being a celebration I expected more lights and tinsel, a tree perhaps, maybe even a mince pie and glass of mulled wine – but perhaps that'll be for after the service. But anyway, even without the lights and tinsel, distinct lack of yuletide carols and festive trees – a very, merry Christmas to each and every one of you..

Now, right about now there's a few of you looking at me, and looking to the bishop, and looking to the Dean, and you're wondering – is this guy out of Belfast or out of his mind? These city folks with their strange ideas. Well, you might be half right with strange.. but maybe the idea isn't that daft at all.

After all, this is Pentecost Sunday isn't it?! The trouble is - we do not give Pentecost the same status in our church calendar, or the same place in our lives, as Christmas. The world doesn't take a day off for Pentecost Sunday. We don't have 9 Lessons and Spiritual Songs for Pentecost. Schools do not run Pentecost plays for mums and dads to take pictures of kids at on for Pentecost. Maybe it's a safety thing – easier to wrap tea towels around heads for shepherds than tongues of fire! Nor do we want the kids to look as if they are drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning.

Yet Pentecost is a day, a happening, an in-breaking of God into our lives and our world of the same order and significance as Christmas.

When the first Christmas day came, the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. Through the person of Jesus, Immanuel, God became with us.
When the first day of Pentecost came, the breath of God became fire and made his dwelling within us. Through the person of the Holy Spirit, God became God in us.

When the first Christmas day came the hopes and fears of all the years, the law, the writings, the prophets, were fulfilled in the promise of God to send His redeemer
When the first day of Pentecost came the promises of Jesus who fulfilled all the law, all the writings, and all the prophets were fulfilled when God sent His companion - the comforter, the counsellor, the advocate, the helper, the guide, when God sent, in Jesus' own words, another like me.

When the first Christmas day came what followed was God with us through
One person, in one place, for one period of time, with one group of people

When the day of Pentecost came what followed is God within us
Through multitudes of people, in every place, across all time, with every group of people

I will be with you always, said Jesus, to the very end of the age, and on Pentecost Sunday Jesus kept His promise.

This is a remarkable day. The day that reminds us that God acts through God's people – to the very end of the age. And on this day we mark, in particular, how God has acted through one servant, your bishop, Ferran Glenfield.

It is a privilege to join with you to mark this day. It really is.

I had the privilege of meeting Ferran, and Jean, their literal family and their church family when I was training for ordination at the Theological College in Dublin. My wife and I had moved to Dublin along with our two daughters and in my third year I spent time as a student in Kill of the Grange parish. We were thoroughly welcomed and made to feel at home by the Glenfields and the whole church.

We picked the right time of year, being invited along to the feast in the Rectory for the outgoing Select Vestry. Ferran was a very patient placement Rector. He covered up my zealous long-windedness in the pulpit by cutting out all but the bare essentials of the communion liturgy in the first service so that we would be ready for the second lot to begin. Though perhaps Ferran's confidence that I would learn my own lesson has been proven to be misplaced!

To me, at any rate and Jean and the kids may or may not agree, Ferran always carried himself in a way that exuded calm, and suggested wisdom (suggested is not the operative word!). There was genuine wisdom there, a pearl of which I will share with you in due course when as part of my studies I interviewed Ferran about what it means to belong to the church. I very much doubt he will remember the occasion, but I can safely say that I have referenced one particular answer that he gave me at least once a month, every month, in my time in ordained ministry – I'll let him sweat for a bit before I make the big reveal.

I cannot come all this way and not observe that the second biggest imprint made by that time in Kill of the Grange on the life of our family is the permanent scar that sits right here on the nose of our younger daughter. Sophie was about 2 ½ at the time and was so excited to pet the cat at the front door that she tripped, fell forward, and banged her nose on the step. Worse still – it was a ceramic cat!

Since that time it has been great to bump into Ferran at various Col gatherings, even when he's extolling or lamenting Munster in the rugby. To catch up on ministry, to have Ferran's guidance and support in the development of Pioneer Ministry within the Church of Ireland. A couple of years ago I took up the role of Archdeacon of Belfast with a particular focus on how we desperately need to reshape the church in the inner city. Ferran came through again with the recommendation that I get my hands on the book 'Solitary and Wild – Frederick MacNeice and the Salvation of Ireland'! I'm not sure whether Ferran likes to think of himself as Solitary and Wild, or whether his focus is on the salvation of Ireland. It's the story of Frederick MacNeice, a son of the Irish Church Missions from Connemara who went on to spend much of his ministry in Carrickfergus and then in the city of Belfast as Bishop of Down and Connor in the 1930s and early 40s. It's certainly resonated with me – not least in being reminded how, for all the differences between then and now, that times, circumstances and dates may change, but at the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

We may think that it is only in these latter decades that there has been a rupture, a schism, between the church and what is increasingly known as the post-Christian world around us. Yet speaking in Belfast in 1935, at a time when the problem was how to raise funds to expand churches, Bishop MacNeice observed...

“the issue that divides mankind today is increasing secularism.. this is the enemy at our doors and the immediate need is the deepening of the religious life of the whole community. The real issue is between two interpretations of the meaning of human life, one secular and materialistic, the other spiritual”

Secularism with all its trust and faith in humanity standing on its own two feet and sorting out its own affairs by itself, and a spiritual humanity - human beings filled with the person and presence of God, putting our trust and faith in the God who surrendered Himself for us, and seeking His will and His ways over all that we are and say and do.

We meet today to mark and celebrate the ministry in this diocese of one such spiritual human being. We meet to rightly mark and celebrate the ministry of one faithful follower and servant of Christ in this diocese. To mark and celebrate 10 years of spiritual oversight, and ministry, of spirit-filled teaching, of spirit-led leadership, of pastoral care and wise counsel. What does the Holy Spirit do – he counsels, comforts, advocates, helps, guides, leads us in God’s ways, teaches God’s truths, and intercedes for us. This is what the Holy Spirit has been doing, and continues to do, through God’s servant, your bishop, Ferran Glenfield.

Yet – Yet, we do not mark this ministry because of anything distinct or special or elevated in Ferran himself, but because this is how God Himself works in this world – through His Spirit, and God does this work through ALL his people. To quote again from Bishop MacNeice in the aftermath of the blitz that devastated the city of Belfast, and a good number of its church buildings, during the second world war

“There are, thank God, things which cannot be shaken.. The Spirit of the church of Christ lay not in its fabric, but in its people”

Yes, this day is to mark the ministry of one man, but more than that this day is about the work of God through His Spirit in and through the lives of each and every single one of us. The same Spirit that spoke to and then through the Galileans, Parthians, Medes and Elamites, is with us now, seeking to speak to and through the Kilmorians, Elphinians, and Ardaghites. We meet to mark and celebrate the fulfilment of the promise of God to pour out His Spirit on all people, so that in us and through us God might be made known to everyone, everywhere!

Yet in affirming and celebrating the ministry of all God’s people, we must go deeper still.

We meet to rightly mark the chief shepherd in this diocese on this occasion. But on the day of Pentecost when Peter stepped up to take on the mantle Jesus entrusted to him to feed my lambs and take care of my sheep, what did Peter point to? On what basis did Peter think that anyone should listen carefully to what he had to say?

Did he point to his own story? Did he point to his own credentials? Did he point to his own qualifications? Did he point to his own training for three years in the seminary with Jesus?

Did he try and make out that now Jesus was gone he had left Peter in charge? That now the chief shepherd was gone he was the new shepherd in town?

No.

He pointed to God's promises in scripture. He pointed to God pouring out His Spirit. He pointed out that God will work through all people – sons and daughters, young and old. Everything about this picture on the day of Pentecost points to the work of God in us and through us that we are not in control of. God comes suddenly through wind and fire, clearing through the house and igniting all his people to action.

And the critical lesson is this – we are not to move - not one of us, lay or ordained, bishop or pew-dweller - not to act, not to speak, unless and until it is God moving, acting, and speaking to us, and in us, and through us. So, we wait.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all gathered together, in one place. They were waiting. Jesus had told them to wait. Wait in the city, until you have been clothed with power from on high.

We don't like waiting do we? We don't like waiting in traffic, waiting on buses, waiting in a supermarket queue, waiting at the airport, waiting for results, and worst of all - "Your call is very important to us. Please hold and one of our agents will be with you shortly"

We do not like waiting. Yet wait we must. Whatever our plans, our schemes, our strategies. Whatever our need to feel important, to feel involved, to feel in charge. Whatever our desire to be in control – we do not control the wind.

So, we wait. If God is not with us, wait.

When Moses was standing on the mountain meeting with God he had been given the law – a second time. He had all the rules. He was appointed the leader over his people. They had their religious customs of Sabbath keeping, of circumcision. They had their ancestry – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet Moses knew that without God's presence with them all of this would count for nothing.

Unless your presence goes with us, do not send us from here Lord. What else will distinguish us on the face of the earth unless you go with us!

Folks of this diocese and every diocese – all God's people, everywhere... it will not be our books and our rules, our particular religious practices and customs that distinguishes us. It will not be our past and those that have gone before us. It will not be the appointing of our leaders.

All such things can be bad or good, but If the person of God is not with us, if the power of God is not within us, if the presence of God is not flowing through us, all of these amount to nothing. The Acts of the Apostles mean nothing if they are not rooted in the Act of God.

So, we wait, to be clothed with the Spirit from on high. I promised you the pearl. Here it is and with this I close.

I mentioned how I interviewed Ferran about what it means to belong to the church. What did it mean to belong to Kill of the Grange? I interviewed a range of church leaders, from different traditions, probably in the search, if I am honest, for neat, clear, robust, and well-defined set of statements of what membership is, of what church should look like. That way, I could go into a life of ministry with a clear idea of what church should look like, and how I might be in control of it.

But we're not in control of the wind, are we.

In the midst of a lot of wisdom on how church communities exist in reality rather than in some make-believe perfect ideal that does not exist, Ferran looked at me and said

'Barry, you always have to leave room for the person who is holding on to the hem of Jesus' garment'

That gospel picture of the distressed lady, bleeding for 12 years, who believes if she can only touch the garment of Jesus, she will be healed.

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...
...and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved... "

Everyone, even the one who is holding on to the hem of Jesus' garment, will then find themselves clothed head to toe, from the inside out, with the power of God, the presence of God, the person of God, from on high – not of their own making or doing, but out of the mercy, and grace, and love of God.

This is what God does for all who call upon the name of the Lord, Immanuel, God with us, God does this through the pouring out of his Spirit, God within us.

Merry Pentecost, everyone, and a Holy Spirit filled New Year.