

**St John Ambulance Church Service
St Peter's Cathedral, Adelaide
Pentecost Sunday 15 May 2016**

Acts 2:1-21	All were amazed and perplexed saying to one another, What does this mean? (v12)
Romans 8:14-17	When we cry, Abba, Father, it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit (15).
St John 14:8-17	Jesus said to Philip, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do you know me?' (v9)

I acknowledge the ancient people of this land on which this Cathedral stands, ancestors past and Elders present – we pray that our imprint on this fragile earth, our common home, may bear the marks of reverence as we journey together towards a reconciliation that is just and meaningful.

On behalf of the Chancellor, Mark Compton, the Chapter and Priory in Australia of the Most Venerable Order of St John, I express our thanks to The Most Reverend Dr Jeffrey Driver, Archbishop of Adelaide, the Dean, The Very Reverend Frank Nelson, and Chapter for your generous welcome to this Cathedral Church. The hospitality and assistance you have so willingly offered to 'the Order' is deeply appreciated.

Michael Leunig, the Australian poet, reflecting on the mayhem and mess, brutality and brokenness found in every part of the world, describes a ritual that helps him deal with the suffering: He holds an atlas in his hand, runs his fingers across the whole world and whispers 'Where does it hurt?' It answers, 'Everywhere, Everywhere, Everywhere.'

This Eucharistic liturgy has a similar ritual where, in Word and Sacrament, we let God place his fingers on the pain and joy of life. Embraced by God who bears the wounds of our world we run our fingers over the contours of the world praying that we may be instruments of healing and hope.

Today with the Church throughout the world we give thanks for the power of the Holy Spirit as it fell upon a group of people gripped by pain and fear. Surrounded by terror, encircled by hostility and danger they cried to the heavens. The heavens come upon them with the primal elements of wind and fire, to cleanse and renew them and the whole of creation.

Jean Vanier reminds us that the origin of the word Paraclete, the Greek word for the Holy Spirit, means the one who answers the cry of the weak, one whose heart is attune to the sighs of those in need. "A mother is a Paraclete for her child, when she answers the cry of her little one, holds and loves him or her ... A father is a Paraclete to an adolescent son confused by the paradoxes and pathos of the world he encounters. A paramedic is a Paraclete as she bends over a person traumatized in a car accident. Jesus was Paraclete for his disciples ... It is the spirit of Jesus the Paraclete who gives us new strength and new love to do the work of God, to do all those things that we seem unable to do by ourselves ... to love those in our families who ill-treat us, to forgive enemies, to become the friends of those who are different, to be open to God's vision and way of doing things.

The description of the Holy Spirit as Advocate, one who stands alongside, is further strengthened by the knowledge that the one who advocates is not some remote theorist but rather one who has heard the cry, the sigh, the whisper. One who recognizes that the hurt is ‘everywhere, everywhere, everywhere’.

The Feast of Pentecost is a celebration of solidarity. Human beings are drawn together by danger and by devotion. We witness this attraction in crowds that engage in protest, in expressing feelings of anger and frustration at things that are seen as disturbing and endangering our lives. Crowds come together to speak for the lives of those affected by prejudice and by political expediency. We are drawn together by the Spirit that binds us together as we cry out against the injustice suffered by the poor, the vulnerable, the person with disability, the refugee and asylum seeker.

We know of many places in our world where communities in the face of grave danger gather to protest against violence perpetrated in the name of religious ideologies and political extremism. Places of destruction are transformed into shrines of hope as candles and flowers blanket the scene as crowds hold hands in silent solidarity, demanding that love will be the last word in the climate of fear.

Similarly, we are drawn together by devotion most passionately seen in the sporting arenas – crowds held in unity by getting behind a team, a talented player, or being captive to the sheer magic of the game. Those of us from the West are subdued this year by Dockers who have not docked and Eagles that have refused to fly!! As for the Crows and Port, I will let you good people of Adelaide make your own judgement.

The writer of the Acts of the Apostles describes a crowd in Jerusalem who find themselves drawn towards a small group of people who seem driven by a power that communicates across the barriers of language, race, class and creed. People were amazed and perplexed and asked, ‘What does this mean?’ Some amongst the crowd looking at the goings on accused the group of being drunk. Peter responds to this accusation – it is nine o’clock in the morning. This is not some group of binge-drinkers expressing their intoxication in noise and revelry.

No, this is a Divine disturbance. It is God’s powerful, fierce response to the cries of brokenness and fear. It consumes the group with a call to be bold and courageous; to be foolish enough to believe that one can make a difference in the world. They are to become a sign of ‘Paraclete’ for the world. The motley band of disciples who had been shaken by the death of their leader, Jesus, now sense the power of the spirit of Jesus. It grips the community and opens them to a newly defined encounter with God.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Christian Church in Rome, underlines this relationship. To be led by this Spirit is to discover that we are children of God. We can cry out with an intimacy borne out of a transformed relationship: ‘Abba – Father’. Adopted by the Divine parent we become through Christ the heirs to a divine inheritance. The Spirit of God infuses us with a confidence that discards the attitude of slavish obedience we may have to God, and calls us to cry out ‘Abba - Father’. We discover a God who is not above and beyond, but who stands alongside us hearing our cry, bearing our pain, attentive to our deepest sighing.

We relate to our world and all those around us not by care instilled by duty, but by compassion instilled by a recognition that all of humanity in the power of the Spirit are our family.

This privileged relationship is gifted to all. What a radical difference it would make to our world if we could include all humanity in the prayer 'Abba – Father'. No-one would kill, maim or destroy another with this creed. It would discredit those who indulge in barbaric acts of terror – crying out 'Allah Akbar' – God is great – as they kill themselves and thousands of innocent people. Surely such a God could hardly be called great.

Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, summed it up when he said, 'in God there can be no unChristlikeness'.

We are challenged by this intimate relationship with the Divine to be advocates for religious leaders who promote deeper understanding of difference, and who demand compassion as the primary vision of any faith.

The conversation between Philip and Jesus in the Gospel of John has an element of irritation about it. Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, the source of life – the Divine. Jesus responds with some impatience, 'Have I been with you all this time, and have you not seen the Divine? If you cannot see it in me,' Jesus concludes, 'see it in the works that are done in and through my name'.

Yes, see it in the mighty works of God in the beauty of creation, in the revelation of God in Christ, in the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Yes, know that the fingers of God have touched the hurt and hostility of the human condition with the healing and wholeness of God's saving grace in Christ. And see God at work in the works that are done to bind broken bodies, to heal injured minds, to reconcile those in conflict – to free those imprisoned by hate, to touch the souls of those gripped by despair.

The Venerable Order of St John is held together by a remarkable crowd. It consists mostly of volunteers. They are people disturbed by the Spirit – the advocate, the paraclete - the one who stands alongside seeking to serve humanity. The Order works to educate young and old in first aid, encouraging preventative health care, and provides ambulance and transport services. Members of the Order are dedicated to respond to the cries of danger and fear in every part of Australia and across the world.

The Venerable Order of St John is bound together by a faith that nourishes and sustains. It has a devotion to the vulnerable, the sick and the poor. Members are called to see in each aching body the wounded Christ. Service to humanity, standing with those in need, is held in the faith that is attentive to the cry, the sigh, the whisper of pain beyond the presenting physical injury. Attending to human need, the responder is challenged to be in a place where deep transformation can take place in their own lives.

There is a profound need for us who inhabit this wounded world to be one in hearing the cry and responding to the hurt. An African proverb says it beautifully. Antelopes always move together so they can lick the dust that gets into each other's eyes. The dust blurs vision, blinds sight, stops movement. Licking the dust from each other's eyes helps us all to see better and to move in solidarity with each other.

Today in this Service of Divine Worship we are a crowd gathered together, crying out to the heavens. We run our fingers over the atlas and we, like Leunig, ask 'Where does it hurt?'

We could run the fingers of our hand over the maps of our nation, our communities, families, our churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. We could run our fingers over the map of our hearts – and we will hear the cry and sighs of dislocation, isolation and loneliness.

Yes, we are a part of the response to the question 'Everywhere, everywhere, everywhere'.

Today extremist ideologies, fanatical world-views and radicalization of a few threaten the lives of all. The dangers of fragmentation are real. We look to the heavens – wind and fire – the paraclete falls on us with grace and goodness. The possibility and potential of the Spirit of God draws us together transforming the danger and fear, the hurt and the wounds, into sacrificial loving. It calls us to witness to the power of faith that leads to service – service that transcends every barrier.

So we pray with Leunig:

We pray for the fragile ecology of the heart and the mind. The sense of meaning. So finely assembled and balanced and so easily overturned. The careful, ongoing construction of love. As painful and exhausting as the struggle for truth and as easily abandoned. Hard fought and won are the shifting sands of this sacred ground, this ecology. Easy to desecrate and difficult to defend, this vulnerable joy, this exposed faith, this precious order. This sanity. We shall be careful. With others and with ourselves. Amen.

Michael Leunig, *When I Talk to You: A Cartoonist Talks to God*,
HarperCollins, 1990

We who have received God's grace. We will be the Paracletes for our hurting world. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Renew the face of your world.