

Trinity College Cambridge  
Sunday 27 May 2012

**Whit Sunday (The Day of Pentecost)**

Ezekiel 36: 22–28

Acts 2: 22–38

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Some months ago we were reading Rabbi Jonathan Sack's book *The Great Partnership* in the refectory. It is the custom in Benedictine monasteries to listen to something being read whilst we eat – but often enough, I regret to say, I am only half listening. My attention was, however, captured by a section in this book when he speaks of his time as a student of philosophy here in Cambridge in 1968. He mentioned the intense questioning that arose in his heart and mind about God and the things of God and he went on to say that he went to the United States to try and discover contemporary Jewish “holy men” in the midst of the vibrant Jewish culture there. Two names kept recurring in his travels. The first was Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the leading thinker of American Orthodoxy. This rabbi was not only heir to a leading dynasty of East European Talmudic scholarship, but was also trained in the methods of Western philosophy. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn was the second. He had done what no other previous Jewish leader had ever tried to do. He had sent emissaries throughout the world, seeking out lost and disaffiliated Jews and, wherever possible, bringing them back to faith.

Rabbi Sachs was determined, whatever the practical difficulties, to meet these men and eventually he did. Of the two encounters, his meeting with Rabbi Schneersohn spoke loudly to my own experience. I will give the account in his own words:

“My encounter with Rabbi Schneersohn was unlike any other. The first half of our conversation proceeded conventionally. I asked the questions, he gave the answers. Then, unexpectedly, he reversed the roles and started asking me questions. How many Jewish students were there at Cambridge? How many were actively identified with Jewish life? What was I doing to engage with them? This was something for which I was not prepared. I was on a private intellectual quest, with no larger intention. I was interested in *my* Jewish identity, not that of others.

I began my reply with a typical English evasion: ‘In the situation in which I find myself...’ The Rebbe allowed the sentence to go no further. ‘You do not *find* yourself in a situation,’ he said. ‘You *place* yourself in a situation; and if you placed yourself in one, you can place yourself in another.’ We were losing Jews, he said, and each of us had a responsibility to do something about it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> see Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 2011, pp 89–91.

It seemed to me at the time, and it seems to me today, that this passage of his book speaks also to us in the Christian Churches. National and European statistics indicate that the situation which Sacks describes with respect to Jewish identity and Jewish belief is being played out in our own time in all the Christian denominations.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. We are celebrating the birthday of the Christian Church, the moment when the Apostles emerged from hiding in the Upper Room and began to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to the bystanders in Jerusalem who were gathered there for the ancient Jewish feast of Pentecost. We know the historical setting well enough: Fifty days after the celebration of the Passover, the commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt, Jewish believers were meeting again in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of weeks which marked the end of the wheat harvest. It was, we might reasonably say, simply one more feast in the Jewish liturgical year, a routine event in the life of a Jewish believer. But the feast of Pentecost following the death and resurrection of Jesus was different. It was marked by the followers of Jesus emerging from hiding and by their preaching of what they called the “Good News”. This “Good News” inspired belief in the person of Jesus Christ in the hearts and minds of their listeners so that Luke tells us that on that first Pentecost day 3000 were added to those who believed (Acts 2: 41), to those who were disciples.

At this evensong we have heard two texts from the sacred scriptures: a text from the prophecy of Ezekiel which speaks of the creation of a new heart within the breast of believers, a heart of flesh rather than a heart of stone; and a second text from the Acts in which we have listened to part of Peter’s address to the crowds after the first descent of the Holy Spirit. What are we to make of these texts? How do they connect with the feast we are celebrating? And how do they connect with the challenges posed to us by Rabbi Schneersohn?

At issue here in the first place is the way in which we regard the sacred scriptures: are they simply dead words on the page or are they something more than this? You will not be too surprised when I assert with the author of the letter to the Hebrews, “The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4: 12) and then agree with the blessed Apostle, “All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be upright” (2 Timothy 3: 16). I believe, then, that the sacred scriptures can guide us today as they have guided Christians in the past and I want to suggest that if we reflect on what we know of the lives of the Apostles we will understand something about our own experience of Pentecost.

For this much, at least, we know: the apostles were faithful companions of Jesus in the course of his public ministry. They listened to his teaching. They saw the signs he gave. They observed his way of life. The Apostles accompanied Jesus in his final journey to Jerusalem and shared the Passover with him for the last time – but when the moment for resolution came then they faltered, broke down, and ran away. The Mother of the Lord, two other women, and the beloved disciple stood at the foot of the cross. We are told that disciples placed the body of Jesus in a tomb hewn out of the rock after his death and we are told that three days later they found the tomb to be empty. The scriptures tell us that in the days following the Ascension the disciples remained hid as a group, but that on Pentecost day a change occurred and they began to preach the Good News. At the risk of being overly simplistic I want to suggest that what we see here is first Preparation, and then Encounter, and this is followed by Mission. If we are ready to be challenged as Rabbi Sacks was challenged by Rabbi Schneerson, if we are ready to believe that we may have some part to play in spreading the Good News of Christ, then we must expect to see the same pattern that was applied to the Apostles repeated in our lives.

How do we prepare? We prepare by allowing the Word of God in Scripture to speak to us. We give time each day to this encounter with the living God. We explore this Word in the context of the community of believers and test our insights against those of the tradition of the Church, that “which has been believed everywhere and all times”, to use the words of Vincent of Lerins. We set aside time to pray each day. This period of preparation is a time when we must be prepared to be patient because what is happening here is God’s work, not simply a question of our efforts. If we are patient, and if we persevere, then we change. We may not notice this change. The first indication that we have changed may come from others – but we will change. And what is happening here is that the heart of stone which all of us have within us – at least to some extent – that heart of stone is becoming a heart of flesh: a heart, which has been changed by the action of the Spirit so that Christ may be seen in us.

This time of preparation is followed by an encounter with the living God. The dramatic conversion of a Paul (see Acts 9: 1–20 and parallels) or the noisy, life-changing, descent of the Spirit as it is described in the book of Acts (see Acts 2: 1–4) are not the most common actions of the Spirit; more often the Spirit is encountered in the gentle, hardly-to-be-heard whisper of the wind that we hear described in the call of Samuel (see 1 Samuel 3: 1–10) and the encounter of Elijah with God on Sinai (see 1 Kings 19: 9–13). Furthermore, we must be ready to expect repeated periods of preparation and encounter in the course of our lives as we enter more and more deeply into the mystery of God. And these periods of change are often challenging and disturbing, for what we thought we knew for certain is often taken away from us as we search yet more deeply for Truth.

At some point in our journey of faith, however, we are called to share what we know, what we believe, with others and then we are engaged in spreading the Way, the Good News of salvation. Whatever our way of life, whether we are in the desert or the market place, God rarely calls us to a life of complete silence. It is more usual that we should share our faith in the example of our lives, in the words we utter, in the support that we give to those who are around us. It is most often in this prosaic, un-dramatic, way that we are called to mission.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our present age the Church has never been more in need of the witness of those whose lives have been touched and changed by the Holy Spirit. Unsurprisingly we are most often judged by the failings, even the crimes, of those who call themselves Christians and most especially those who are believed to be Christian ministers. Today we need to remain steadfast in our faith; confident that the Holy Spirit is in our midst changing and guiding those who have been called so that the world may believe in God and in his Christ. In this evening hymn of praise and thanksgiving, we have committed ourselves once more into the hands of the Living God. Let us be faithful to our reading of Scripture and to the Christian life asking the Lord that we may be responsive to his Spirit. Let us pray that the Spirit will change each one of us. Most importantly of all, let us pray that the Spirit brings about the unity of believers that was the prayer of Christ himself.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.