

Trinity College, Cambridge, Pentecost, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008  
Linda Woodhead

Many years ago I was sitting in a chapel about this time of day, just up the road at Emmanuel where I was an undergraduate. Members of the chapel and choir used to be responsible for leading the intercessions. The chaplain supplied us with the usual formularies and, inserting names to be prayer for here and there, we followed them obediently.

Except for one occasion. It was an evening when a member of the choir who was from a black West Indian Pentecostal background led the prayers. The style was not one we were used to. It happened that the Dean had been ill that week and was presumably tucked up in bed at home. With her hands and face raised to the heavens the student prayed: Lord Jesus let your healing juices pour down upon our Dean. We ask that Satan be bound from his family and his ministry. Lord send your Spirit down and heal him!

This made such an impression on me that it has stayed with me ever since. Because I have pursued a career as a sociologist of religion I have had many, many occasions to participate in far more exuberant and moving kinds of Pentecostal worship both here and abroad. What made the Emmanuel experience so memorable was the clash of expectations. People would hardly have been less astonished if a large lion had made its way up the chapel aisle to receive a blessing.

This episode came to mind as I read the lessons for today for the festival of Pentecost. They speak of the Spirit's descent upon the followers of Moses, and upon the disciples of Jesus. Both stories have a similar structure: the followers are filled with the spirit, they express this dramatically through prophecy and speaking in tongues, some witnesses are disturbed and complain, but they are told that the gift of the spirit is to be celebrated and is a sign of God's power.

Pentecostals would have no problem with these passages, indeed they would see them as confirmation of their belief that charismatic gifts are what bring the church to life. Many of them would, I am afraid, say that this chapel is 'dead'. So long as the Spirit is not made manifest with power, there is only empty ritual and 'dry bones'.

Are they right? Do these stories tell us about the original fuelling of the church, and have churches and chapels like this been running on empty for some time?

Let me start by returning to that evening in Emmanuel Chapel. What happened there was not really a clash of beliefs or doctrines, but a clash of emotional energies. Every bounded social situation has its own emotional atmospheric, and we take it in the instant we walk into a restaurant, family home, office, or college garden. The atmospheric of this chapel is very like that of Emmanuel. It's the product of the relationships which constitute it, not only relations between persons but between persons and 'things', including this whole architectural space, the music and the decoration. So within this space you can feel and express certain emotions but not others.

To use a musical analogy, this chapel - like every other religious community - has a distinctive emotional scale. Some notes can be sounded and others cannot. It is a setting which allows, enables, teaches and embodies certain emotions including guilt, sorrow, forgiveness, relief, peace, faith, hope, love. It blocks others, including playful humour, romance, rage, gut-wrenching grief, ecstatic joy.

Religions are schools of emotional cultivation. People come to have their moods transformed, and to feel things they might otherwise not feel. It might be grief at a funeral, or wonder at a baptism, peace and calm and quite exaltation after a service like this. Is that trivial? Of course not. Our emotions are our basic orientations on life, our stance towards the world. Latin sums it up best when it speaks of *motus animi* 'motions of the soul'. Emotions are what *move* us.

The idea that we are passively subject to emotions is mistaken. We see this in the Christian conviction that emotions like pride, anger, and sloth are *sins*, as well as in the way in which love is *commanded*. We are responsible for how we feel.

But as soon as I say that you will realise that emotions are not only short-lived and very intense experiences like receiving the Spirit and speaking in tongues. There are also enduring emotions. Christianity captures this in its now almost forgotten distinction between 'sentiments' and 'passions'. The passions are the short-lived intense feelings like the heat of anger, the transport of falling in love, the exhilaration of being part of a political rally, an overwhelming experience of the Spirit. Sentiments are more enduring. It's the difference if you like between falling in love and being in love.

Christianity went far – too far – in denigrating the passions in favour of the sentiments. A life without passion would be a pretty sorry thing. But perhaps we have gone to the opposite extreme with new media of communications, entertainment, and advertising which try to whip up emotional highs on a regular basis. Religion can succumb to the same temptation.

I spoke to an elderly and rather saintly Methodist man the other day and I asked him what Christianity meant to him. He said that he found it all in the Bible, and he thought the Old and New Testaments could be boiled down to a single sentence: 'In the beginning, love'. Was that a belief? Of course. But more importantly it was a steady sentiment, an emotional stance, which shaped his relationships with the world, and which was part and parcel of the particular Methodist atmospheric which shaped him. Was it also related to a few intensely moving and life-changing experiences – passions – which had given substance and conviction to his stance? Yes, it was.

In one way or another, we are all trying to live lives which are emotionally satisfying to ourselves and others. We are shaped by and we *help shape* the emotional atmospherics of the settings in which we find ourselves. Some people achieve a quality of emotional life which is inspiring and which rubs off. But they are not born like that. It takes discipline and commitment and the company of others and the right atmospheric to feel appropriately and to achieve a harmonious emotional life.

Religions are experts in emotional training. Most offer some combination of passion *and* sentiment: of ecstatic, transforming intensity and steady, quotidian emotional

formation. Most of us need both, in combinations we cannot and should not specify too tightly in advance. The Spirit blows where and when it wills. Whit Sunday is a good time to be reminded of that.