

Year B – Pentecost – 20 May 2018

Every year, on this day, I am fond of saying that this is the birthday of the Christian Church. Others might argue that Christmas or Easter should be given that particular honour, but Christmas was really the birth of Christ and Easter was the birth of the Christian faith. It wasn't until this day, just over two thousand years ago, that the actual Church was created.

When Peter and the other disciples were granted the gift of the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire and speaking in languages they previously had no business speaking, God was saying *to* them, and *through* them, “that person named Jesus whom you got to know really well, and the faith you developed in me through him, are *your* responsibilities now. What I sent *him* to start, I am sending *you* to finish. Go. Show. Tell.” And hence, the first Christian church was created.

But what is the Christian Church? What is it that we are celebrating when we recognize the birthday of the Church? The Christian Church is the body of Christ: the hands that serve the people Jesus commissioned us to serve; the feet that take the good news about Jesus Christ into the world, into every nook and cranny where Jesus' name is still unknown; the mouth that speaks his name and proclaims the awesome love he is sharing with every person who is willing to receive it; the ears that listen to the stories of hope and courage that people have to share when they are journeying along the road to a new relationship with God; the eyes that see and witness the pain in the world that is at our doorstep and half way around the world; the heart that cannot stand still and do nothing while the hands, the feet, the mouth, the ears and the eyes do the work God has created for them to do.

The Christian Church is the active, vital and living body of Jesus Christ in the world today. And *that* is the birthday we are celebrating – the birth of us, of every baptized Christian in the past, present and future who believe in Jesus Christ, who want to serve God and who are willing to be inflamed by the Holy Spirit to live out that service. Today, on this feast of Pentecost, we celebrate the birthday of the body of Christ, not the buildings in which we worship Christ.

For some it may go without saying, but it needs to be reiterated nevertheless. The buildings in which we gather to celebrate Christ and to become replenished and ready to serve again, are *not* necessary to the fulfilling of the gospel, nor are they required for God's work to be done in the world. Yes, they are incredibly important. In many ways, our church buildings are like photo albums – they hold the snapshots of our memories. They remind us of where we have been and give us a safe place in which to dream about pictures to be taken in the future. But, if we really listen to God when we gather here on Sunday mornings, we will hear him reminding us that the work he has called us to, the life he demands that we live, if we recognize him as our Lord, cannot be lived out within this building. In order to accomplish our mission, we need to leave it behind for the week and focus ourselves on the world outside our doors. And that is where the true Christian church is – outside our doors and within us as individuals and as a community. So, when we celebrate this auspicious occasion of the birthday of the Christian church, don't look longingly at the walls and stained-glass windows, remembering years gone by. Look instead into the eyes of your neighbour in the pew, or the person sitting across from you and dream of where God might be leading you, as an integral part of the church, between this birthday and the next.

Now, we know what the Christian church is, so that we can celebrate its birthday, but *why* do we celebrate the anniversary of its birth? Well, we make a feast on this day for much the same reasons that we celebrate our own birthdays: we want to give thanks for the time that we have been given; we want to recognize the importance of the life we have and its milestones; and we also recognize our birthdays as times to evaluate and plan for the future.

The birthday of the Christian church is much the same, with a great deal of emphasis on the latter: we are given a chance to reckon with who we are as a Christian community and decipher God's plans for the next leg of our journey.

When I was 13 years old, my family went on a cross-country trip from Ontario to the West Coast. All 5 of us were in a motor-home for 21 days, and to minimize cabin fever and the obvious fights that three children between the ages of 4 and 13 could get into, my mom encouraged me to read. One of the books that I read was about a young girl who was going into her last year in junior high and she decided that she was going to make it her year. Similar to the Chinese Year of the Ram or the Horse or something, she was going to do everything in her power to make that year the Year of the Clare – her name. What was most interesting for me about this book was that it was on her birthday that Clare made the decision and from that time forward she worked hard making sure all her dreams came true.

Being an impressionable new teenager, I picked up on that idea and decided that my grade-eight year was going to be the Year of the Rachael. (Please don't laugh. I was very serious about that!) My plan may have been flawed and my goals may have seemed quite juvenile, but that year taught me something very important about birthdays. No longer did I think that birthdays were simply about parties and presents, although those are wonderful bonuses. I began to think of birthdays as opportunities for taking stock of where I have been and discerning where I might be heading. That Year of the Rachael plan also helped me focus on the good in life rather than dwelling on the pitfalls of being a teenager. By looking at my thirteenth year as a time of opportunity and new possibilities, I learned a great deal. I became a better student, making the shift in my mind that I was no longer just an average person with average capabilities. I began to realize that I was a good student. I became a better friend and person as I paid more attention to what I was thinking and doing. And that was the year that I made a decision to be in a relationship with Christ.

My Year of the Rachael that was sparked by a book I started reading on my birthday was not a tremendous, earthshaking year for anyone, but it changed who I was becoming and helped me to become someone better. By paying attention to the possibilities God was laying out in front of me, I was able to make choices that led me to where I am today, and for me that is a good thing.

The feast of Pentecost is a day of celebration in which God sent the Holy Spirit to proclaim that this is the Year of the Christian Church. But unlike the personal decision I made when I was 13 to make that *my* year, God chooses every year on the Feast of the Pentecost, to make every year the Year of the Christian Church.

We are called upon to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit, speaking in the languages that only our hearts can understand. We are called upon to hear the call of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and to act upon that call. We are called to act on what the Holy Spirit has commissioned us to do, quickly and immediately, because *this is* the Year of *Us*. We are the Christian Church, all of us sitting here today, and we have been chosen personally by God to do our best, to live our faith, and to serve Christ in as many ways as we can discover.

This feast of Pentecost, our celebration of the birthday of the Christian Church, is nothing new, it is nothing we haven't seen before, but it is leading us *to* something *new*, *to* something we *have never seen before*. The Holy Spirit is inviting *us* to be the ones upon whom the Spirit will descend, and then, with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, will come the flames of desire, passion and hope that we will not be able to deny or ignore.

When you have received your birthday gift of the flames of the Holy Spirit in your heart and soul, you will desire to live out God's word as proclaimed to us in Jesus Christ. You will feel the igniting of a passion you have never before felt the energy of, as it moves into every facet of your life and urges you to serve Christ in every person you meet. And you will feel the unfolding of the flower of hope within your heart – a hope that is beyond words, beyond human understanding, but which will be evident to others in the way you live your life.

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be a Helper, a Counsellor, a Friend and an Inspiration, to the disciples and to all who will open themselves up for that most important and powerful of birthday gifts. As members of the Christian Church, as members of the Body of Christ, we are called upon to pray for that gift of the Holy Spirit upon the Church universal. But we can also use this day as our own Christian birthday, as an opportunity to pray to God to make this the Year of the Rachael or the -- -----, or the -----, to make this year the year when we will be truly blessed by the presence and knowledge and the power of Jesus Christ in our lives through the Holy Spirit.

When we come to recognize the need we have to be filled with the Holy Spirit, then we will come to recognize the greatest peace, the abundance of gifts and the tremendous love that God has for us. All these birthday presents, and more are waiting for us. All we need to do is humble ourselves to ask God to share them with us and then use them well when he does ...

God is just waiting for us to recognize that *today* is our birthday ... and then he is expecting us to grow up in our faith and use those Pentecostal/birthday gifts he has so freely given us.