

Merrylea Parish Church Glasgow
Pastoral Homily by the Locum the Revd Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 31st May 2020
Pentecost.

“When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak”.

(Acts 2: 1-4)

When will all this be over?

When will everything get back to normal, the way it used to be?

Will it really be the same as it was?

So many of us are beginning to ask these questions. After all these weeks of necessary lockdown and enforced self-isolation, people are understandably growing weary and becoming anxious to get their life back to the normal routines of going to work, children attending school, businesses up and running. And so, roads are gradually getting busier as more and more people feel it safer for them to resume whatever norm had been their everyday. Consequently, pressure is steadily being heightened at Westminster and in Edinburgh, particularly by the media, for our political leaders to spell out a precise timetable telling us how our present situation will be eased. Who would be a politician at this time?

Recently, I read a review of a book called *‘Uncharted’*. Its author, Margaret Heffernan, is an entrepreneur and business writer. Apparently, within the book she makes a robust critique of what she calls our *‘addiction to prediction’*.

Our fervent desire to know and chart the future – and our exaggerated view of our ability to do so – forces us, she says, into a straightjacket whenever some authoritative-sounding source makes a prediction. For then, we can all relax, accept what’s being said and simply let it happen: the future has been laid out – it’s been forecast. Only by kicking this habit, she argues, do we stop making *‘spectators’* of ourselves and, instead, become active and creative participants in our own future.

The review stated that Heffernan provides some interesting cautionary tales concerning authoritative predictions already made. Take, for instance, the 2013 prediction by researchers at the Oxford Martin School that *“by 2035, 35% of jobs will have been taken by machines”*. Heffernan says this was an impossibly specific quantity: *exactly* this number of years in the future, *exactly* this percentage of jobs done by robots. Think about it and such specificity is absurd. It was only a hypothesis. However, the media attention it attracted only served to play on people’s legitimate fears about the coming age of automation.

As a counter to this tendency to overegg our ability to predict what the future holds, Heffernan offers advice on how to improve predictions without falling prey to dabbling in faux-specific pseudoscience or misleading generalisations – use humility, embrace uncertainty.

The Scripture passage above tells what people believed happened on that day we now celebrate as Pentecost.

Pentecost, for them, was a time of empowerment. If in the light of your own faith which, at the best of times, may be a little uncertain, fickle and wavering, you feel slight tinges of envy that this should happen all these years ago and wish the Churches today could somehow regain a renewed sense of energising power, remember this...

One of the powers already given to us is the power of perspective: knowledge of the strengths we already have, the love that is ours and the presence of God with us always – even though physically Jesus no longer is. Our perspective as people of faith influences how we act and handle this life. Its power is real.

Jesus told his disciples of a power they would receive. A power so real that it would take them out of their familiar places and even their everyday jobs and change their lives for ever. But first they must have the humility to lay their uncertainties aside and allow themselves to embrace the possibility of change; to be altered in ideas, and open to truths that may be the very opposite of what the world values. Not a message that is easy or especially comforting. To have life turned upside-down and inside-out is hard to accept.

As we try to predict what the future may hold for us and how life will be for our family, our friends, our neighbours, our church after this pandemic is over, perhaps it seems the power to change our life for the better is so little. And maybe it is. It can even seem inconsequential. All the more so in the face of some bizarre predictions made about how life is going to change beyond all recognition. How are we to cope? Well, we need not panic. An expedition to Judea and Samaria might have once seemed like an unwelcome venturing to faraway, unfamiliar and hostile places. A mammoth task. For, in truth, it is indeed a long way to the ends of the earth. But, then, every journey begins with just one step and then another.

Prayer:

Loving God, things are changing. Lockdown is easing and, mercifully, I can meet with family or friend or neighbour. But it's not always easy to keep a distance especially when I want to embrace and enjoy a hug. A small price to pay when others have given so much for my protection and some, even, life itself. May I remain vigilant as I journey, step by step, towards a new future. Comfort those who have suffered the heartache of loss, strengthen the frail and fragile, calm the chaos of families trapped these past months without resource to fresh air and places to relax and enjoy space. Pour your blessing on families, friends and unknown strangers alike. And whatever future may be predicted, may I continue to place my trust in the power of your love. In Jesus' name I pray this.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. AMEN.