University Sermon, Oxford, Whit Sunday 4th June 2017
Acts 2:1-21

The traditional reading for Whit Sunday tells of the early community being gathered in one place and there being a sound like the rush of a violent wind. Tongues as of fire rested on each of the disciples, and they gave testimony to their new gifts in speaking in other languages – in other words – translation, and in a radical reintegration of their existing scriptural tradition. Old texts were re-read and re-applied differently.

The transition the early community underwent was more like a leap forward than a transfiguration. ‘Transformation’ is one of the most overworked and most tired positive descriptions used today, whether applied to business processes, run-down rural cottages or a re-jigged moral outlook. Whit Sunday doesn’t describe transformation or transfiguration. It is a leap forward, not an erasure of the past. It is continuity unexpectedly enhanced. It is a transition we often miss-describe.

Let me give you a concrete example. It is an old one. St Laurence was a deacon in Rome during the persecution by the Emperor Valerian. According to tradition, he fell under the suspicion of the Prefect of Rome who ordered him in three days to hand over the treasure of the Christian Church. The tradition tells us that after three days, Laurence led the Prefect to a church, and opening the doors he showed that therein he had gathered the poor, the lame, the widows and the orphans. Opening his hand, he said, ‘Here is the treasure of the Christian Church’. For that act of theatre, Laurence was martyred on a gridiron in the year 258.

Laurence’s act was extraordinarily courageous. I still catch my breath. But in this context, I am chiefly interested in it as an act of improvisation. It wasn’t a transformation. And it certainly wasn’t a literal adherence to the teaching of Jesus or St Paul. Yet at another level, how utterly obedient it was, and how totally he understood much that was at the heart of the teaching of Jesus. Like an actor without a script, he improvised and he did it so inexpressibly well. That is the hard-to-describe transition of Whit Sunday, and it is more to do with translation and re-integration than erasure or new beginnings. It is a leap forward.

Laurence didn’t just light on his extraordinary action by accident. It flowed from a person who had been steeped in liturgy, prayer and acts of kindness.

Following this train of thought, the Whit Sunday event of new speech and new integration is mirrored by the story in Acts chapter 10 of the God-fearing gentile Cornelius who was told by an angel to send to Joppa and summon the help of St Peter. Prior to receiving their message, Peter himself had a dream of a great sheet filled with animals let down from heaven. He was told, ‘Kill and eat’ and he declined because he had never eaten anything profane or unclean. And God told him, ‘It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean’. And so Peter met Cornelius and told him the story of Jesus. The Holy Spirit fell on the gentile listeners and they spoke in tongues of ecstasy and told the greatness of God. Once again, it is a story of a leap forward, not an erasure. It is accelerated continuity, translation and re-integration.

Is it possible to think of this today?

I spent a nine year spell as president of Princeton Theological Seminary. I was asked to go there to help to ‘transform’ their lack of outcome-based student evaluation but quickly found that governance and budget reform were every bit as pressing. Together we navigated the downturn of 2008 and I learned a new language of management-speak and read a new literature, including the famous book called ‘Getting to Yes’. This wasn't a Whit Sunday event.
There was a great deal of management and I had wonderful colleagues, but I could not help asking myself, ‘Can we truly manage ourselves out of such a financial buffeting?’ Is the solution not more a spiritual one, a change of heart much more than a different asset mix, greater liquidity and a more inclusive strategic plan?

I know very well that managerial solutions have their place but they are not and cannot be the whole story. That is not what Whit Sunday is about. And whatever St Laurence told the Prefect of Rome, it wasn’t a managerial solution about the community’s asset mix.

So just briefly, let us cast our Whit Sunday eyes on that intractable question which so bewilders and divides the church – how to integrate with integrity the vocation of gay people to ordination and Christian marriage.

I defy anyone, no matter how skilled and adroit across the negotiating table, no matter how tactful or how patient to bring in a negotiated solution. Managerialism is the wrong currency. A different approach might be to invoke the quasi-theological notion of ‘ambiguity’ and hope that from it may be wrung enough oil to calm very troubled waters. ‘Ambiguity’ is a kind of conjuring trick from yesterday and my sense is that it is now bankrupt.

But remember the early community with its tongues of fire and its ability to re-integrate old scriptural certainties. Remember the improvisation of St Laurence and that his innovative gesture was rooted in intense study of scripture and repeated charitable actions.

Fifty years ago in my church, the Church of Scotland, it was agreed that women might be ordained. It was a grudging decision, forced on reluctant men, who realised that their prejudice had to be constrained by justice. But gradually, through deeper study of scripture and the early tradition, they came to embrace the truth that the priest who stands at the altar and says the words of the Eucharistic Prayer presents Christ in his humanity not in his gender. Deeper reflection showed that gender was actually nothing to do with it. That was the Whit Sunday moment, a moment of greater integration rather than a discontinuity.

That is one ingredient in today’s struggle. It is a Christological element to the sexuality dispute.

Within the last couple of years, Robert Song at Durham has pointed to an eschatological element in the same dispute. Christians, he tells us, are nourished by the blood of Jesus, not by the blood of Abraham. It is Jesus who says, ‘Take, eat. This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you’. There is a profound sense in which Christians procreate through baptism at an even more fundamental level than they procreate physically. This means that our sexual identity is shaped eschatologically as well as Christologically.

That, too, is a Whit Sunday moment – a new language, a non-binary presentation of the formerly polarized issue, an improvisation rooted in intense study of scripture.

Years ago, when confronted with the sexual liberalism of the 1980s, Stanley Hauerwas argued that no accumulation of negatives was going to enforce chastity or faithfulness. Instead, he argued that we as Christians needed to set in front of people the challenge of an adventure, a way of living which is fuller and richer rather than one which is merely open in a vacuous way. That was his Whit Sunday moment, and the Holy Spirit of Pentecost still promises to revitalise our moribund habits and structures.
Amen.