

Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
Sunday 31 May 2009

READING: Acts 2

'God is outside the box, on the loose' – that's what I said on Easter Day – 50 days ago –

... moving between, within, around, above ...
messy, uncontainable ...

– hence the red box today.

On that first Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover, after Easter, the disciples are all together in one place – things are changing. They've just chosen a replacement for Judas.

The waiting, the fear, the uncertainty has vanished spectacularly for now, and they experience an indescribable experience of power, of clarity, an outpouring of spirit, of boldness, of ability to speak and be heard, and understood by people from all the known world – a reversal of Babel.

God is on the loose in these figures with feet of clay.

But what is in the box? (Open the box.)

The box is empty because God is out there...

But is it really empty?

Black and White Cow story ...

There was once a man who owned black and white cattle. They were no ordinary cattle and he tended them as if they were his children. He took them each day to graze in the green pastures and they gave white frothy milk. But for three mornings, when the man went to milk his cows, their udders were empty and withered and they gave no milk. So he decided to stay up at night and watch them. And he did.

In the middle of the night he saw a rope come down from the sky. Women descended from the sky with calabashes (large gourds). They were sky people. They placed their calabashes on the earth beneath his cows and milked them until the gourds were overflowing with the white frothy milk. Then they began to ascend the rope.

He saw one woman more beautiful than the others and he wanted her for his wife. So he caught her. The other women ran away. She struggled, until he cried out to her, "I want to marry you." She stopped struggling and said, "Mortal, I will marry you on one condition: I have a finely woven basket. Promise not to open it until I give you my

permission. If you open it too soon, harm will befall us.” He promised. She married him.

She placed the basket by the door of their house. She was a good wife. She even tended his black and white cattle. But as time passed, the man grew curious. “What does she keep in the basket?” One day he thought, “What harm will it be if I look? And after all, isn’t she my wife and isn’t it then my basket too?” So when she was tending his cattle, he opened the basket.

The man began to laugh, for he saw nothing in her basket. So he closed it, putting the lid carefully onto the bottom. Just then the wife returned home. “What did you do today?” she asked. Laughing, the man answered, “I looked into your basket.” “What did you see?” she asked sadly. “I saw nothing. It was empty,” he said laughing.

The woman picked up the basket and put it on her knees. “You saw nothing. But the basket was full. I kept all the beautiful things of the sky in the basket for you and me. If you had waited, I would have taught you to see.” She left. The woman who came from the sky went back to the sky.

Spirituality and Story

The box is empty ... or is it?

Do we dismiss it too quickly in our rushing busy world? Perhaps we need to spend some time with this box, and wonder ...

What is there that we cannot see?

Do we dismiss it too quickly in our rushing busy world? Perhaps we need to spend some time with this box, and wonder ...

What is there that we cannot see?

Maybe God is in this place in our lives we never knew ...

Rex Hunt begins his sermon for today this way –

A man whispered, “God speak to me!” and a Kookaburra laughed. But the man didn’t hear.

So the man called out, “God speak to me!” and thunder rolled across the sky. But the man didn’t listen.

The man looked around and said, “God, let me see you!” and a star shone brightly. But the man didn’t see.

Despairingly, the man said, “God show me a miracle”, and a life was born. But the man didn’t notice.

Desperate now, the man said, "Love me, God", and his wife smiled at him, but that was so normal, he missed it.

Feeling completely alone, he whispered to the heavens, "Touch me God and let me know you are here!" God reached out and touched the man. But the man brushed the butterfly away and went sadly on his way.

Imagine. Holy Spirit ...

What do you know of Spirit, Holy Spirit?

who moved on the waters at creation
who was with the Prophets in their speaking
 with Jesus in his conception and birth (Luke 1:35)
 his baptism (Mark 1:9-11)
 his ministry work, (Matthew 12:18)
 miracles, (Matthew 12:22-28)
 preaching (Luke 4:18-21)
 and temptations (Mark 1:12) ...
and is sent by Jesus in his place (John 16:7-9, 2-22, Acts 1:5,8) ...

Holy Spirit
 the advocate
 the speaker of truth
 the go-between with God
 manifest in breath, wind, fire, stillness.

What do you know of spirit, Holy Spirit?

Poured out on all people,
 Breaking down barriers of prejudice and discrimination.
 Messy, Boundaryless. Outside the box ...

What do you know? Where do you see Spirit, here, in your home, your place of work, at play?

Be open.
 Look, listen, wait.

*Spirit of the living God
Fall afresh on me
Break me, melt me, mould me
Fill me
Spirit of the living God
Fall afresh on me*

We call
We pray ...

If Spirit is here in this community – what does she/he look like?

If Spirit is in us, individuals – what does she/he look like?

I think Wednesday night was an expression of Spirit for me.

+ Stuart praying for numinous experiences

tears

tears, lightness, delight, laughter ... empowerment.

What does Spirit look like? empowered

healing, care of poor??

freedom ... ?

I end with a quote I used in my Easter sermon:

Watch out! God is on the loose. God is out of the box!

Haven't we human beings always tried to keep God in a box, under our control? We've tried to keep God in the box of religion. We have allowed ourselves to be persuaded that God can be subjected to rules and regulation and religious practices, can be under the control of religious hierarchies, church committees, human systems. Do this, and God will be pleased with you; do that, and we can assure you that you will fall under God's sever displeasure. Isn't that the way, very often, that religious bodies imagine they control God?

But believe in resurrection [believe in Pentecost] and God is free, free from all religious systems, free to use religion to meet us on God's terms. As Jesus told us, 'The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sounds it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of spirit.' (Good News Bible)

So perhaps there is reason to be a little afraid, as we look at the empty tomb [the empty box]: To be afraid that our attempts to control God through religion are doomed; to be afraid that our cherished traditions are, in fact, not the last word, for God has had the last word – or rather we should maybe say the last laugh of God's life as God broke free from every bond on that first Easter Day. God is on the loose! Tremble then, all who think they have God tied down with religion.

And if God is free – if Christ is risen – then there can in fact, be no forcing of God in to any human box at all. Not only can we no longer think that God is a Protestant or a Catholic, or white, black or brown; no longer think that god is more like us nice middle class folk; no longer imagine God prefers Christians to Muslims or vice versa. Now we can no longer allow any ideology or nation to hijack God. God is not on 'our' side any more than God is on 'their' side. So tremble, you statesmen and women who imagine you can co-opt God onto your side or into your army or into your ideological box. God can never again be tied down by any of our political

systems, however wonderful we may imagine them to be. God is on the loose. [Here is a hint of what Spirit is, what Holy Spirit looks like. ...]

And I suspect – indeed I am increasingly convinced – that to truly celebrate the resurrection, to truly welcome God on the loose, we need to be constantly willing to hand over control to God. All must be constantly handed over, laid down, given up, and we must allow God to be God: crucified and risen and on the loose in our world, out of control.

I like the thrill of imagining the unimaginable: the One who made the sun, the moon and the stars bursting out not just from the tomb, but from every box into which we try to put him, and striding free and majestic and totally out of our control, into all our lives; inviting, challenging, summoning us to be free – like him!

(by John Harvey in *Eggs and Ashes: Practical & Liturgical Resources for Lent and Holy Week*, by Ruth Burgess, Chris Polhill, published by Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, 2004 pp233-234)

Do you think this might be the message of Pentecost?

about 3,000 became followers on that day of Pentecost ...
how many more today?