
Re-Reading Pandora

Acts 2.1-20

A sermon preached at Duke Chapel on June 8, 2014 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

When I was a teenager I knew my mother was dying. She and I dealt with this in different ways. I wanted to sit in silence and darkness with her for extended periods and just absorb what life she had left to give. The rest of the time I wanted to be alone and doing something constructive. Her approach was to give me presents. One Christmas she gave me a pool table so I could invite friends round to cheer me up. One birthday she gave me a train set – even though she knew that when it comes to electrics I've got two left hands. The way I responded to these grand gifts is something I'm not proud of. I left them in the box.

I left them in the box because I refused to let her make everything happy with gifts. I left them in the box because I hated being considered a child who could be given toys and easily distracted. I left them in the box because I resisted being overwhelmed by material things when my heart and soul were screaming for the oxygen of honesty and hope. Of course politeness and a reluctant grace won out and eventually on each occasion I went through the motions of figuring how the present worked and cherishing her kindness. But my response was too little, too late. And she and I both knew it.

Leaving aside my motives, I want to stay for a moment with that picture of leaving the gift in the box. I wonder if that's a picture that has the same kind of pathos for you as it does for me. Maybe you've got a similar resistance to being given gifts. Perhaps you recognise in someone you care about a gift that remains profoundly unopened, a skill that's remained a hidden hobby, a talent that never blossomed into a professional calling but could have been a blessing to the whole world. Or could it be that you see yourself, when you look in the mirror, as an unopened gift, a person no one wanted to hire, the right suitor never wanted to marry, a leader no one wanted to be led by.

During the ten days between Jesus' Ascension and the Spirit's coming at Pentecost, this is the question we're dealing with. Jesus has shown us the heart of God in Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Galilee. He's healed the outcast, confronted the oppressor, and shaped the disciples. On the cross he took into himself the poison of sin. In his resurrection he brought perfection to creation and brought creation to perfection, dismantling death and opening out the wonder of eternal life. Now he's returned to the Father's side, what is going to happen to this indescribable gift? With the disciples battening down the hatches and nailing down the shutters, it looks pretty certain the present's going to be left in the box.

Some years ago I read a story in the paper of a man who'd left Ireland in search of a better life. He went to London and fell on hard times. He slept outside a lot, and over a few years grew weak and downhearted. One winter night he died in the snow. A couple of years earlier a wealthy widow had died in Killarney without a husband or children. When they tried to trace her nearest relative the trail ran cold with a man who'd apparently left Ireland for London some years before. It was the same man. That homeless man was a multi-millionaire. But he never knew it. He died a pauper's death. The present remained in the box.

That looks like being the disciples' story, those ten days before Pentecost. They're wealthy beyond their dreams, but they lack either the will, or the hope, or the trust, or the humility, or the courage to get the present out of the box. The whole of God's story, the whole story of the church, the whole of salvation history lies in the balance in those ten days. Ten days in which, each year, we desperately discover our need of the Holy Spirit. The disciples left Jesus in the tomb as surely as I left my mother's birthday gifts in the box. And without Pentecost, my guess is, that's where he'd still be.

And let's not pretend that this process hasn't taken place in different ways throughout the history of the church, and doesn't still take place. The poet Edwin Muir rages against the Church of Scotland for the way it has followed Calvin's 'iron pen' and turned God into 'three angry letters in a book.' He

bewails how the mystery of Christ's incarnation is 'impaled and bent' on the 'logical hook of ideological argument.' Muir witheringly concludes, 'The Word made flesh here is made word again.' It's as if Muir describes the whole Scottish church squeezed into the disciples' fearful and narrow upper room, keeping that box firmly closed.

How do we comprehend the transformation that came over those disciples? Perhaps only by analogy. I wonder whether you've ever been involved in great or small ways with adult literacy. Adult literacy programmes are a humble enactment of Pentecost. Because there's nothing more liberating, more empowering, and more energising than learning to read – and a person who learns to read as an adult is someone who knows what it means to break out of the confinement and impoverishment the disciples experienced in the box that was that upper room.

The 2008 film *The Reader* is set in post-war Germany. It tells two parallel stories of how Germans faced up to the horror of what they and their parents had done in perpetrating the Holocaust of six million Jews. The first story is that of Michael, a teenage boy in the 1950s, who grows up to become, in the 1960s, a lawyer. As part of his training he observes a trial of some women who had, during the war, let 300 Jews die when they were locked in a burning church. The second story is that of Hanna, a tram conductor, who in the 1950s befriends and then seduces Michael while he's still a boy, before suddenly disappearing. Much of their relationship involves Michael reading to Hanna from great works of literature. To the adult Michael's astonishment and horror, ten years later Hanna reappears as one of the defendants in the case of the murder of the 300 Jews in the burning church. Thus the film revolves around two mysteries: one, why does a tram conductor embark on a relationship with a boy 20 years her junior, and two, why in the trial does she admit to a greater role in the murders than she really had, and thus face a life sentence in prison?

The answer to the two questions and the metaphorical centre of the film turns out to be the same. Hanna can't read; she can't bear for anyone to know she can't read; and yet she craves the world that reading opens up for her. She goes to unimaginable lengths to hide her illiteracy. And yet somehow she cannot or will not learn to read, despite the real and metaphorical prison her illiteracy brings upon her.

Hanna's illiteracy is a metaphor for the moral illiteracy of those who brought about the Holocaust, and the inability of that generation of Germans to escape the culpability for what they had done. But Michael suffers a different kind of prison. The intensity of his teenage liaison with a much older woman inhibits all subsequent intimate relationships; and he becomes emotionally crippled by the past. His literacy, and understanding of deeper meanings and consequences, cripples him, while Hanna's illiteracy, in a different way, imprisons her.

Michael acquires a tape recorder and begins to make recordings of the books he used to read. He sends the recordings to Hanna in prison. She finds the appropriate books in the library, and, by listening to the recordings, teaches herself to read. Eventually she reads a survivor's account of the sufferings endured in a concentration camp and, overcome by guilt, days before her release from prison, she hangs herself. There's no reconciliation with Michael, and no release for Michael of his crippling emotional cross; but there is a sense that Germany, 40 years after the war, is just beginning to become literate on what it was and what it did. It is just starting to open the box.

As an account of Pentecost, you may be thinking, this has to be as depressing as it gets. But the theological point is this. Just knowing something isn't enough. That's like keeping the present in the box. It's not enough for Hanna and Michael to be aware of the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon, whether they were involved in it or not. What changes everything is the ability to read. Without that ability, everything remains paralysed. When Hanna learns to read, she for the first time stops contorting the truth, imprisoning herself, and abusing those around her to get what she needs. For her it brings about her suicide; but the irony is that those last days in her life are the first time she'd been truly alive. When we take that entering the truth, that opening of the box, as a metaphor for the work of the Holy Spirit, we can see how vital the Holy Spirit is in our understanding of faith and of God.

Jesus is the embodiment of God's decision never to be except to be with us. Ok, but so what? Jesus is the full glory of God looking us in the face and the utter fragility of humankind looking God full in the face. Sure, but what comes of that? Jesus' cross is the utter manifestation of God taking on the consequences of our failure and folly. Jesus' resurrection is God bursting open the everlasting glory of eternal life. Fine, but I've still got to pay the bills and there's a ballgame at the Bulls' Athletic Park tonight. We create a hundred reasons not to open the present. We're frightened of getting carried away. We're used to things more tangible, more immediate, more... simple. We deal with forgiveness by trying to forget and death by attempting to distract. The truth is, left to ourselves *we would never open the box*. If we were the disciples we'd *never* come out of the upper room unaided, however sensational the gospel of Jesus was. Like me as a teenager, we'd say, 'Don't disturb me in my solitude and my coping mechanisms. I don't want your gift. I get all the head stuff about Jesus – I'll get to thinking about it in my own time.'

And that's why God sends the rushing wind and tongues of fire. Here come the wind that hovered over the waters at creation and the fire that consumed everything at the giving of the law to Moses. The wind that pushed the disciples out the door and the tongues that gave them words to say. Jesus changes everything, but for most of us, most of the time, we can't see the difference. We're like a teenager who won't open the box, like a middle-aged woman who can't read, like a homeless man who doesn't know he's actually become a millionaire. We need the Holy Spirit. We've been liberated from Egypt; but we're in the wilderness and we need the Holy Spirit's wind to be our pillar of cloud by day and we need the Holy Spirit's flame to be our pillar of fire by night.

Seven hundred years before Christ, the Greek poet Hesiod wrote a poem called *Works and Days*, in which he told the story of Pandora. Pandora was the first woman on earth and all the gods clothed her with fine gifts. When she married she was given a box that she was told she must never open. But she did open it, and out came all the evil in the world. This story is not in the Bible. The trouble is, we treat it as if it were. We leave the gifts of God in Christ sitting in the box. We bar our windows and shut our doors and batten our hatches as if Christ were not raised from the dead. We live in illiteracy and do a thousand drastic things to hide our reality rather than risk opening our eyes. We are the man from Killarney who lived and died in ignorance of the wondrous inheritance that would have been his had he not closed the door and resolved to remain alone.

But here's the good news. *If we won't open the box, the Holy Spirit will*. God the Father sends the Son to disclose the secret of the universe – and sends the Spirit to turn that secret into wind and fire. Rushing wind to send us, like the disciples, out the locked doors and through the barred windows and spread the world over. Tongues of fire to turn us into living flames of love, to give us words of gentleness, wisdom, and truth, to burn away our fear and distraction and forgetfulness and feel our hearts burning within us.

God opened the box of Christ's tomb and raised him from the dead. But we through ignorance, weakness, and self-preservation try to close that box again and put Christ back in it. And maybe ourselves too. So God sends the Holy Spirit in wind and fire to open that box, empty that tomb, burst out from that upper room and push us into that new life. Try to batten down the hatches, yours or God's, all you like. It's Pentecost; the Holy Spirit's here in wind and fire – and is opening up God's box, and yours, anyway.