

The Rev. Bob Honeychurch
The Feast Day of Pentecost
May 11, 2008

At first glance, they look like children's toys scattered along the hillsides. But as you draw closer, you come to realize that these are no playthings. I am always struck, as I drive east on 580, and approach Livermore, by the sight of rows of windmills strung along the ridges that lie just beyond the town up on the Altamont Pass. Every time I drive over the pass, even when it feels as though the air is absolutely still, somewhere along those long delicate lines of windmills, there will be at least a few of them slowly turning, and turning one kind of power into another.

Those windmills also mark a geographical, and cultural, and philosophical, and demographic line as well. To the west of the Altamont Pass lies the teaming, dynamic, chaotic Bay Area. And to the east lies the expansive gateway into the central valley, one of the richest, most fruitful agricultural areas in the entire country. Those windmills really do demark the line between one world and another. They stand at a crossroads of sorts, and represent in a real and tangible way that, at that thin line between one world and the next, the winds of change are often at their strongest, their most vital, and their most life-giving. Where the winds are blowing, changes are afoot.

Some 2000 years ago now, 50 days after the Jewish Feast of Passover... on that holy day the Jews call Pentecost... those same winds of change blew through and amongst a faithful group of men and women... forming them, and informing them, and transforming them from a loose-knit group of believers into a unified, focused, and mission-driven community... and the church was born. Whatever those folks had thought they were beforehand, God had now re-created them into a whole new Body. Whatever work they had once believed might be their divine purpose; they now understood their relationship with God, and their relationship with one another, and the work that God had set before them, in a whole new way.

Yesterday morning, while the sun was shining brightly on a beautiful spring weekend day, some 300-400 people from across the Diocese of California gathered in the artificially-lit basement of Grace Cathedral, thinking that we were coming together for a special convention of the diocese. Our thinking was partially true. We were, indeed, coming together for that reason. But those of us who were there, and thought we were just attending one more diocesan meeting, missed the magnitude of what went on.

For the past year now, the diocese has been involved in a process which the bishop has called "Building the Beloved Community." It has been an intentional look at ourselves, at how we perceive the work that God has set before us here in the Bay Area, and at how we might best accomplish that work. This entire process came to its culmination yesterday morning.

Our morning at Grace Cathedral was divided into three sections. We began by receiving the official report of the group that had done the study over the past year. Essentially, this diocesan-wide listening process had generated five basic statements describing what we, as a diocese, desired for ourselves and for the world around us. Those five characteristics are:

Rooted Spirituality – a deeper understanding of how God is at work in us, and how we are at work in God;

Church Vitality – a desire to make the congregations across the diocese more meaningful, more alive, more relevant in the communities in which we find ourselves;

Embodied Justice – a belief that God is calling us to live out our Christian vocation by making the world a better place, by bringing God’s realm into being in ways that people’s lives will be changed;

Organizational Development – the understanding that we have to make some changes, and re-imagine how we organize ourselves, both as congregations and as a diocese, to most effectively accomplish this work; and finally,

Inclusive Community – the commitment to an understanding that we need to constantly be tearing down the barriers that tear at the fabric of our common life – whether those barriers be economic, or racial, or gender, or sexual-preference, or age, or ability driven.

The final section of our time was dedicated to introducing the new Assisting Bishop for the Diocese of California. Steven Charleston, a Native American born and raised in Oklahoma, is the former bishop of the Diocese of Alaska, and the current dean and president of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge Massachusetts. He will be coming to California to share in the fulfilling of this vision of a beloved community.

But it was the middle section of our time yesterday – a time which was, admittedly, the least glitzy and the most laborious – that will produce drastic changes in our understanding of ourselves as Episcopalians here in the Bay Area. After considerable discussion, the convention yesterday voted to approve a complete overhaul of our diocesan canons – the rulebook, as it were, for how we will function as a diocese. The implication of those canonical changes will be felt for years and years to come, in ways I think many of us can’t even yet imagine. If there was ever a “way we’ve always done it” here in California (and be assured, that sentiment is strong in this diocese), come January 1, when these new canons go into force, “the way we’ve always done it” will be no more.

It was, for me, an exciting time to be a part of this diocese. It was exciting to see substantive and meaningful change taking place. It was exciting to see a real vision for the way forward. It was exciting to see the Spirit at work, and blowing full force through the people gathered together.

That wind which blew through our gathering yesterday at Grace Cathedral is the same wind which blew through the disciples’ gathering on that day of Pentecost so long ago. And it is the same wind which even now is rattling our doors and shaking our windows, and threatening to break into our lives, and break into our church, and break into our world today. It is the same wind we invite to blow into the hearts of Ryan Baxter and Dwight Osha as they are baptized this morning. It is the same wind which blows out the cobwebs of the past and brings with it the promise of all things new.

The promise of Pentecost is that the winds are blowing. And just as the winds at the top of the Altamont Pass mark the line between one world and another, so too do the winds of Pentecost mark the line between the world as it is and the world as it might become.

Are you ready for it? Are you ready to let God's holy wind carry you to places yet unseen? Are you ready to experience God's transforming love, right here in our church – changing us from who we are to who we might become? The weather forecast calls for clear skies, and for strong gusts, and for 100% chance of showers – showers of grace – as God's Spirit descends on us all... in the wind and fire of Pentecost.

Amen.