

May 31st 2020 Sermon for Pentecost –

Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary's Church Watford

Collect for Pentecost

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, ignite in us your holy fire; strengthen your children with the gift of faith, revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Bible Reading Acts 2:1-21

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked; ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’ Some however, made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine.’

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd; ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

Gospel Reading John 7:37-39

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”

Let us pray. Father God we thank you for sending your Son Jesus to be our Saviour. And we thank you today for the gift of your Holy Spirit whereby we continue to hear the words of hope and promise that our Saviour brings to the world. As I speak today may I be faithful to your written word that will lead us to the living word who is Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Imagine what it must have been like on that first Pentecost Sunday. Jerusalem was crowded on account of it being Shavuot, a Jewish festival similar to our Harvest Festival. An occasion where Jews were expected to return to the Holy City to celebrate this religious festival. So imagine a crowded city buzzing with excitement. Gathered together in one place were the disciples, around 120 in total. Ever since Jesus' Ascension some ten days earlier they had been together, watching, waiting, united in praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit. What then happens is astonishing. As we have just heard in our reading. "Suddenly the sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from Heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." It must have been quite a commotion. But amazingly all those visitors from around the world, God-fearing Jews, could hear the disciples speaking in their own language. No wonder they asked 'what does this all mean?' A question many of us have asked ever since.

Those of us who know the Scriptures, might well recall the story of the Tower of Babel which appears in the book of Genesis. In many ways it attempts to explain why the world's people's speak different languages. According to the story a united human race in the generations following the Great Flood speak a single language. In the land of Shinar they become inspired to build a city and a tower tall enough to reach heaven. God observing their city and tower confounded their speech so that they could no longer understand each other, and scatters them around the world. Not only does this explain why there were so many languages in the world, more importantly it tells us we cannot reach heaven through human endeavour alone. It's only through God's providence, grace and mercy can we ever reach the heights of heaven. If Babel lead to confusion, then Pentecost leads to clarity. The Holy Spirit comes from heaven. It is the reversal of Babel. The disciples may be speaking in many different tongues, but they are speaking with one voice, the language of love. Heaven comes to earth. And because the Holy Spirit comes from heaven, it is not constrained by time and space. It is at perfect liberty to come and blow where ever and how ever it pleases. Sometimes it is a violent wind, but other times it is a gentle breeze.

If you heard my sermon on Jesus' ascension into heaven, I reasoned that the Ascension teaches us three things about Jesus. Firstly that Jesus is supremely personal. Unlike any earthly encounter where we have to go to a certain place at a certain time, meeting Jesus is not constrained in this way. He can meet us where ever we are. And because he loves us beyond all measure, and knows us better than we know ourselves, he will meet us in the way that is right for us. Secondly Jesus is supremely powerful. He sits on the throne of heaven, he is above all things. And then thirdly Jesus is our High Priest, our advocate, the one who intercedes on our behalf. And all of this applies to the Holy Spirit who is equal to Jesus in every way.

I also said in an earlier sermon, that the Greek word used to describe Jesus' teaching on the Holy Spirit, is translated from the Greek Parakleetos and it means the one who is called in. The one who is called in to help. Just as Jesus is our advocate, so is the Holy Spirit Jesus' advocate, he speaks on Jesus' behalf, And we can be confident that the Holy Spirit is supremely personal. The Holy Spirit comes to the disciples as they are one group, united in prayer, men and women of many different backgrounds all together. The flames of the Spirit land on each disciple. Each disciple speaks in a different tongue, and they are heard

by different people from all over the world. Each hearing the disciples speak in their own language. It would seem that the message of God's kingdom is for everyone, regardless of race, language, gender or any other difference. Just as the tongues of flame land on each and every disciple, so the Holy Spirit comes to each of us, in a way that is just right for us, for surely God our heavenly Father, knows each of us better than we know ourselves, and gives to us exactly what we need. The gift of the Holy Spirit is bespoke, it is tailor-made.

How do we receive the Holy Spirit? Well, we simply ask. We invite the Holy Spirit to fill us afresh, to dwell within. In our Gospel reading, Jesus says 'let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.' He is speaking about the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is an invitation. If your life at the moment feels empty and shallow. If you feel unloved, under-valued. If you are looking for meaning and purpose. If you are feeling alone and at loss in this world. If you need inspiration, then come, drink, receive the eternal gift of the Holy Spirit. Like a river flowing within you, it will never run out.

There are times when we do feel we need a top-up. But the answer remains constant. Come and drink from the waters of life. The source will never run out because it is eternal, that never-ending stream. If we continue to read the book of Acts, we will learn that the disciples kept on being filled with the Holy Spirit as they continued to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. And today the Gospel continues to be proclaimed all over the world, in many different languages, and yet with this one voice of love, declaring the wonders of what God has done.

Pentecost is a revelation. It is a sign that comes from God, it comes from heaven. It declares that God is at work, he is building his kingdom here on earth. We know from the reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, that the message of Jesus was one that was to come and preach the good news of the kingdom and it was so often accompanied by miracles, sign and wonders that demonstrate the reality of God's kingdom here on earth. And so we see the prophesy fulfilled that the blind will receive their sight, the deaf will hear, the dumb will speak, the lame will leap for joy, the prisoner will be set free, the dead raised, and there is good news for the poor. There is good news for everyone. In God's kingdom there is no sickness, no death, no tears, there is no conflict, there is no poverty. There is justice for everyone. Everyone will live in God's kingdom in peace and prosperity.

The death and resurrection of Jesus has brought this kingdom into a reality here on earth. Those who encounter the risen Jesus know what is possible, indeed they know what has already happened. The kingdom is here. The cross, the death of Jesus is God's perfect atoning sacrifice for all our sins. Something so perfect, so complete, that we can be confident that when we turn to God our sins have been forgiven. The resurrection means that death has been defeated. In Christ we have been given the gift of eternal life. The Holy Spirit confirms the reality of this truth. What Jesus has done is a sure sign of the reality of God's kingdom breaking through. But of course we also know the kingdom is still breaking through. What we might call the 'now but not yet' reality of the kingdom.

The Holy Spirit has been given to the church, the people of God who together form the body of Christ and as we read it fell on each and every one of the disciples, we might reasonably presume each spoke in a different language. It is estimated that there is some 7,000 different languages in the world today. The Bible continues to be translated into many different languages and dialects. Indeed we are very proud that two of our church

members have been translating the Bible into a particular Kurdish dialect. The work of God's church is to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom to every corner, every nook and cranny of this world.

The Holy Spirit is God's gift to the church that enables God's people. If you're in any doubt as to whether the Holy Spirit is present and at work in the world today, then go onto YouTube and see these Blessings videos where men and women, boys and girls in many different churches have proclaimed God's blessing on their own particular country and these have come from as far and wide as Australia, Malaysia, Hawaii, Sweden, Zimbabwe, South Africa and many other countries. The Holy Spirit is at work in his church around the world today I can assure you, it's almost like spreading faster than this pandemic. And if that is not a sign of the Holy Spirit at work today, I don't know what is.

We are all called to be part of that work. We all have an important message to share. But we're not simply called to proclaim the good news, we are also called to live the good news, and indeed to be the good news to others. They say that actions speak louder than words. There is no doubt that the message of the Gospel is powerful, it is compelling, it is transformative, and yet it gains its credibility when it has been lived out. And where genuine, unsolicited acts of kindness and love flow.

As the crowds continue to ask 'what does this mean?' and what all this commotion in Jerusalem was all about Peter addresses the crowd. He quotes from the prophet Joel reminding everyone present that God has said 'he will pour out his spirit on all people, so that your son's and daughter's will prophecy, young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams.' Have you ever imagined what the reality of God's kingdom might look in its entirety? Think for a moment of the things that bring you joy in this world. Maybe it's the birth of a child, it may be a wedding celebration, it may be being on holiday, being with family and friends, it may be the end of lockdown. Indeed we can dream and hope for a world where there is no sickness or disease. A world where we can simply enjoy God's creation, where we can be in harmony with our environment in such a way that we do not have to worry about climate change. We long for a world where there is no war, no conflict, no political unrest. A world where there is no poverty, where there is justice for everyone.

Think for a moment of those things which give you joy and make you glad to be alive. Can you imagine God's kingdom not having such moments of joy. Indeed we might argue that rather than being fleeting moments, in God's kingdom they will be a constant experience. Perhaps it's no wonder that the first miracle Jesus performed should take place at a wedding in Cana in Galilee, the turning of water into wine. Wine has long been associated with life and vitality, and indeed joy. The Psalmist writes 'wine gladdens the hearts of men.' We must remember that Jesus turned many gallons of water into wine, it is a sign that he came to give us abundant life, abundant joy. We often talk about the new wine of the spirit. We are told that at Pentecost there were some in the crowd who accused the disciples of being drunk even though it was early in the morning. We can be confident the new wine of the spirit gladdens the hearts of the disciples that day. And continues to gladden our hearts when through the presence of the Holy Spirit we recognise God at work in our lives. It is perfectly reasonable to be dreaming dreams, and having visions of what God's kingdom can look like. Indeed I would encourage you to do so. After all, God is calling you and I to be part of his kingdom and to work for that glorious day when it will all be complete. There

is a tongue of holy fire that has your name on it. It is a tongue that knows your language. It is a tongue of fire that knows your most intimate needs, who sees your unique potential. The Holy Spirit breathes in new life, so ask and receive this precious gift that comes from above.

So come Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love. Fill us afresh. Let us dream dreams, to have visions and look forward to that great day when the kingdom has come and our joy is complete. As the psalmist says 'you make known to me the path of life, you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.' Come Holy Spirit and make our joy complete. Amen.