

## THE SERMON for PENTECOST SUNDAY – May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

Readings: Acts 2: 1-21; Psalm 104: 26-36; 1 Corinthians 12: 1-13; John 20: 19-23.

Well, we made it through Lent, with the direction to “Listen to Him!” ringing in our ears; we have come through the season of Easter, pondering what it is to be Resurrection People; we now start the long season of Pentecost, the green season, the “Ordinary Sundays”, which I have always felt were the time for our personal growth. Growing time!

Are we still Listening to Him? Have we worked out that we are Easter People living in a Good Friday world rather than the other way around? People of the Resurrection!

Have we thought about what God is requiring of us, you and me?

Of course the only way we can get answers to all these questions is through prayer and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and what better day to think about these things than today – Pentecost Sunday!

This morning we see something of the diversity in the way the different gospel writers tell their story, because we hear two accounts of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples.

The first is Luke’s account from the Acts of the Apostles - probably the more familiar and traditional account associated with Pentecost.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. [Acts 2: 1-4]

It is so full of symbolism, most of which passes us by unless we stop long enough to look.

Firstly, there is the word itself “Pentecost”:

‘Pentecost’ is the anglicised form of the Greek word for 50<sup>th</sup> and refers to the 50<sup>th</sup> day after the Passover. After all, Pentecost was not a Christian invention but came from an ancient Jewish festival.

Luke has given a symbolic structure to the first weeks after Easter. The risen Jesus makes special appearances for 40 days after which he ascended. The Spirit comes on the 50<sup>th</sup> day: Pentecost. 40 is a special figure linked with preparation (Israel was 40 years in the wilderness; Jesus was tempted 40 days in the wilderness). The symbolism Luke is using would have been understood and appreciated by his hearers. .... And in early Church tradition, Luke’s symbolic narrative won the day and we now celebrate the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, 50 days after Good Friday. <sup>1</sup>

The usual symbol of the Holy Spirit is that of the dove. The dove that bears the olive branch back to Noah on his Ark, signalling that dry land was near after the flood. Then there is the dove which appears to descend upon Jesus at his baptism. But here the symbolism is not so much that which brings blessing or comfort, but rather power and new life. Here Luke uses wind and fire to describe the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In Greek the same word which is used to describe spirit, is also used for wind and breath, so you can get an idea of how interchangeable they are.

Wind: There’s the wind of God moving over the waters at Creation; the wind that held back the waters of the Red Sea, dividing it so that the Israelites could walk safely through; the wind that swept over the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel’s vision, enabling them to stand up and take on new life.

Earlier in the week, we had quite strong winds here over night. I certainly didn't get much sleep that night. I am still getting used to the sounds of a new home, one of the extractor fans was banging and the sensor lights which Chris had turned on kept going on and off! It reminded me of my first May in the Rectory when we had that big wind which blew part of the fence down!

Wind, that at one level can be so destructive, on another level is so life-giving as it turns windmills, pumping water or generating electricity.

Then there is the fire: the tongues like flames dancing above the disciples' heads; the fire that illuminated the burning bush but which did not consume; the pillar of fire which went before the Israelites in the wilderness by night.

But then, the power of wind and fire not only inspires, it also terrifies. You put the two together, and you have a devastating force: wildfires. In Australia we are all too familiar with those and their tragic consequences! <sup>2</sup>

There is an old Jewish saying which goes something along the lines of: "God is not your favourite uncle, God is an all-consuming fire." An apt description of the Spirit of God which was experienced on that day of Pentecost.

Beside the power and drama of Luke's version, comes John's version of events. Perth theologian, Bill Loader, suggests:

"John's gospel pictures Jesus ascending on the day of his resurrection (after meeting Mary! 20:17) but before he appears as the risen (ascended one) to his disciples (20:19-23). On that same day of the resurrection Jesus appears to his disciples and gives them the Spirit (19:22). What Luke describes as happening over 50 days John portrays as happening all on the same day!" <sup>1</sup>

While both accounts take place in the upper room in Jerusalem, there is something incredibly intimate about John's account which is so different to Luke.

Some of the most intimate moments between two people who love each other are experienced when they are close enough to feel each other's breath. The disciples would have been taught about the breath of God - in terms of both its life-giving properties and its power to destroy. They could never have imagined, however, being close enough to God to feel his breath on their cheeks, as close as a nursing child with its mother or as close as a lover. There, in the lamplight of that locked room in Jerusalem, Jesus leans forward and breathes on them: "Receive the Holy Spirit." <sup>3</sup>

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus is shown appearing to his disciples in Galilee, and sends them forth to baptize all nations, to preach and to teach everything that he has taught them. At the end of John's Gospel, the risen Lord appears to the disciples and says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," and then Jesus breathes on them just as God breathed life into Adam in the beginning. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he says. In Acts 2, we see the effect and the result of this gift of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' disciples ready to go forth into the world. It is as though the rushing wind has caught them up into God's purposes, and the flames have set their hearts and minds afire with the desire to bear witness to the good news.

Filled with the Spirit of God, the disciples can now speak, preach, teach, and communicate in such a way that they are understood by all sorts of different people in many different languages. In the words of the old hymn, we are "ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven," in Christ - and now we are put to work with the Holy Spirit.

But is this scene from Acts 2 really about us? Isn't it just one more miracle story affecting only a handful of high-class saints long dead? St. Paul, who quite famously was not there at the time and knew nothing of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection or the wind and fire of

Pentecost first hand, but was absolutely and utterly convinced that just as Jesus was Emmanuel, God-with-us and God-for-us, so the Holy Spirit is God-for-us and God-in-us. Therefore Paul writes so passionately and convincingly in 1 Corinthians about how God is now getting the job done in us that he started in Jesus. We have a variety of gifts, he says, but it is the same Spirit that activates them. We are engaged in a variety of ministries and activities, but it is the same Spirit of God who energizes them in us. Wherever, and in whomever, we find wisdom, faith, knowledge, and healing--there is the Spirit of God at work for the common good of all.

There are times when we need to focus on the gifts of the Spirit to each of us as individuals, and times when we need to focus on the gifts of the Spirit to the whole community of faith, to congregations and denominations and to the whole Church at large. How does any one congregation live and work for the common good of its community; how does any given parish council communicate, discuss, and decide for the common good of the whole parish -- these are matters of our common mission grounded in Christ and energized by the Spirit.

It is almost overwhelming to consider that God invites us to receive the Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds to build us up individually, and to receive the same Holy Spirit into our lives in the body of Christ to build up the community of faith, and to receive the same Holy Spirit into our lives to bring reconciliation and peace to all the communities of the earth. But this is God we are talking about: God with us, God for us, God in us; God involving and engaging us in his work. <sup>4</sup>

The coming of the Holy Spirit is not to make us feel good or give us a wonderful 'spiritual experience'. Instead, it is to enable you and me to take into our world the message of hope, the love of God.

In John's account, when did Jesus breath on them? Immediately after he said to them; 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you ...' [John 20: 21-22]

Jesus sends us out, equipped with his Holy Spirit, in the words of Theresa of Avila because:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours;  
yours are the eyes through which he is to look with compassion on the world;  
yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;  
and yours the hands with which he is to bless us now. Amen.

Rev'd Sally Buckley  
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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. Bill Loader "*First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary*" Pentecost.
2. Tammy Rider from a sermon posted on *midrash* in 2005.
3. *New Daylight*; Jennifer Oldroyd writing *When the Spirit came*.
4. Rev. Angela V. Askew sermon posted on "*Worship that Works*" 2002