

Sermon for Sunday 5 June 2022 – Pentecost

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Heavenly Father, would you open your written word to us that we might see your living word come in power by your Holy Spirit we pray, open our minds, our hearts in Jesus name. Amen.

You may want to have the Pewsheet in front of you. I'm going to stick quite closely to the reading from Acts. Well, as closely as I can manage.

Back in Acts chapter one, in the introduction, we heard repeated how we have journeyed through the Christian year, through Jesus' life, through his death, his suffering, through the resurrection, the Ascension, and now to Pentecost. At ascension, and last week we would have read this: 'In my first book, Theophilus. I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven,' and continues.

And Jesus says this to the disciples at the Ascension, 'but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the Earth.'

Now, we're told that Mary, Jesus' mother, was present at the Ascension. And I wonder what Mary might have thought, because the beginning of Luke's Gospel, rather than his second volume, Acts, he has these words on the lips of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.' Do you hear the similarity? To the disciples - 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be my witnesses'. To Mary, 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.' How much Mary have thought? Oh, I recognise those words. Something is going to happen.

And Jesus says, you'll be my witnesses, or you will give testimony to me - testimony, witness, it's the same word in the Greek and in John's Gospel, he recounts (not from our reading today, but a bit further on), 'When the advocate comes, whom I will send from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.' And you also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

The primary purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit - yes, there are gifts, there's the fruit of the Spirit, and so on, but the primary purpose is for the power to be able to witness, to testify that Jesus Christ is Lord, to testify to the good news of the gospel.

Then moving on to our reading today, the disciples have come back from the Ascension. We're about a week apart from the ascension, or ten days to Pentecost, and Luke has told us at the end of his gospel that they were continually in the temple praising God. We're also told that they went back to probably the

upper room and they were praying. And then we heard this, today, when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

Just as an aside there, where it says from heaven came a sound like a violent wind and it filled the entire house. I've often wondered how you could fit 120 people in an upper room in a house in Jerusalem, but also then when these events happen, how all these people heard it.

I wonder whether what has happened, because the word for house and the word for temple is the same - there is a specific word for temple, but the word for house can also be used for temple - is whether the disciples had moved, as Luke tells us, that they were continually in the temple praising God, because it was the day of Pentecost, and later Peter tells us that it's 9 o'clock in the morning when there would have been temple prayers. So in my mind, I don't think, and I'm sorry if this makes things difficult that you've got a picture of how Pentecost works, but I wonder whether they've moved to the temple, were praising God at 9 o'clock in the morning, and then the Spirit comes. And it comes like a violent wind and like tongues of fire. Now, I don't know about you, this weekend has been full of parties for the Jubilee, and it could be argued that it's a party for the birthday of the Church, and I don't think you can have a party without popcorn.

[To a member of the congregation] Would you like some popcorn? Is that the sort of popcorn you like to eat? Paul? No? Mary, you didn't help me with the cake tasting, so you can help me with popcorn. You'll have some popcorn? Would you like to eat that popcorn? Yes. It's hard, isn't it? This is popcorn that hasn't had fire applied to it.

You can't have Pentecost without some fire. So what we're going to do, we're going to take the dry, boring, fairly unpalatable popcorn, and we'll just do a bit of Pentecost type stuff. [Lights a gas burner heating a frying pan, and adds the popcorn to it] Those that are worried, I have done a risk assessment. Over my years, I've known a few people who are like those hard kernels of popcorn, some outside the Church, but sadly, sometimes inside the Church. And you will have heard many times the accusation from folk outside the Church, 'Oh, some of those people...' I said that the primary purpose of the Holy Spirit was to testify, and as we read through the reading in Acts, the people who had gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, suddenly hear, in their own languages, God being praised. As an aside there, there are 17 groups of people named.

You will know that numbers often mean things in the Bible, and in ancient literature, 17 is a triangular number of 153. And John also references 153 fish at the end of his Gospel. And in the Old Testament 153, there's a calculation in the šimrī, in the Hebrew letters being also numbers, of 153 in Ezekiel, where it speaks about all people. So when you see 153 or something that will add up, it is all people, and all people are represented here, hearing God being proclaimed.

But it sounds like the people are drunk - it's 9 o'clock in the morning - Peter says they're not drunk; they've not been at the new sweet wine. There's not been at the Beaujolais Nouveau. And then Peter stands up. Peter, of all people, stands up. Gobby Peter, opens his mouth, sticks his two feet in it most of

the time. And yet here he is, filled with the Holy Spirit, stands up with the eleven. So that's the ten plus Mathias that replaced Judas. And he says this, 'No, they're not drunk.'

This is what was spoken by the Prophet Joel. What is this? This is the pouring out of the spirit, it's the speaking in tongues, it's the prophetic language proclaiming God's glory. He says, '**this** is what Joel said would happen in the last days - when the spirit is poured out those last days.'

[Popcorn in pan starts popping and jumping excitedly out of the pan] You see, this is what happens when you apply a bit of fire to a bit of popcorn. It is my representation this morning of the difference between those not filled with the spirit and those filled with the spirit. We'll just let that carry on.

It's in these last days. [Turns heat down] It's getting a bit hot. In these last days, what is Peter saying? They were in the present age. And Joel said, 'When the age to come or the last days begin, my spirit will be poured out.' And Peter stands up and says, 'It's happening! Something is going on. This is the proof that God has poured out his spirit.' His proof is you hear God being proclaimed, God being worshipped, you hear disciples testifying and witnessing. There's a bit of life about it, a little bit like the bouncy popcorn.

Later in the service, some of you may have read ahead, I'm going to give you an opportunity to come, as we do for Communion, and receive the anointing of oil. Again, there's nothing magic about the oil, but we are people of symbolism and of occasion, and it helps us to remember that at a time and place, we did something. We invite you to come forward for anointing with oil, and a very simple prayer, to be filled with the Holy Spirit. And you may say, Graham, I'm a good Anglican. I'm a good member of the Church of England. I was confirmed and the Bishop laid his hands on my head and asked me to be filled, prayed that I'd be filled with the Holy Spirit. I believe it happened then; and I would agree with you, but as Michael Green, the former Rector of St Aldate's in Oxford, said, I need to keep being filled, because unfortunately I leak.

So I'd invite you at that point to come forward for anointing to pray that you would be filled with the Holy Spirit, that you can do what those first disciples did and be witnesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.