

Sermon for Sunday 24 May 2026 (The Day of Pentecost)

Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector

Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104.26-37; 1 Corinthians 12.3b-13; John 20.19-23

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

I thought I'd start with a poem because I came across this poem while I was reading up for my sermon and I just liked it. I'm not sure it's got anything much to do with the rest of my sermon, but I liked it. So this is a poem by a guy called Malcolm Guite, who often writes in the Church Times and is a well-known contemporary Christian poet. The poem is entitled Pentecost.

Today we feel the wind beneath our wings.
Today the hidden fountain flows and plays.
Today the church draws breath at last and sings
As every flame becomes a tongue of praise.
This is the feast of fire, air, and water
Poured out and breathed and kindled into earth.
The earth herself awakens to her maker
And is translated out of death to birth.
The right words come today in their right order
And every word spells freedom and release.
Today the gospel crosses every border.
All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace.
Today the lost are found in his translation
Whose mother tongue is love, in every nation.

So I thought it was rather a beautiful poem. And Malcolm, in his poem, makes reference to fire and air and water as symbols of the Holy Spirit. And I was intrigued this year by why wind, why rushing wind, is one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit. So I thought I would talk about that this morning, about the wind, the violent rushing wind.

Have you ever stood outside when there's been a violent rushing wind blowing around in creation? Or perhaps you've been on a ship at sea while there's been a violent storm, the waves have been whipped up by the wind. I can remember the hurricane of 1987, October 1987, being woken in the middle of the night by the sound of the violent wind rushing around and going out into the garden and seeing trees split in half, branches whipped uncontrollably. Mighty familiar

trees that must have been growing for 100 years or more felled in an instant. You might remember that the town of Sevenoaks became the town of One Oak overnight.

The world would never look the same again, would it? The landscape transformed by the violent energy of the wind. Stirred up and unleashed onto the face of the earth. But the storm was also the opportunity to begin the process of renewal. And today, many years after that great storm, we wouldn't notice, would we? The world has been renewed and things have regrown.

Going for a walk on a windy day, you might say to yourself, the wind will blow the cobwebs away. And the wind of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost just does just that. The wind of the Holy Spirit blows the cobwebs away, refreshes and makes things new. So there were three things I wanted to think about. One was about blowing the cobwebs away and healing, in a sense. The other is judgement, and then new life.

So the wind blows at the Lord's command to cleanse and refresh, to blow the cobwebs away. In the Old Testament, there are a number of stories in which God sends a powerful wind that is an instrument of judgement and justice and renewal and of blowing the cobwebs away.

So the prophet Jeremiah speaks about a scorching wind from the barren heights in the desert, which will blow to bring God's judgement on God's people and to Jerusalem. And in the prophet Isaiah, he sees the wind describing as a force that will scatter the enemies of God's people. He will winnow them, and a wind will carry them away, a gale will scatter them. But you will rejoice in the Lord, and you will glory in the Holy One of Israel.

And in the book of Exodus, the Lord uses the east wind to bring a plague of locusts upon Egypt. Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt. The Lord sent an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. By morning, the east wind had brought the locusts. So those are evidence of the Old Testament, the wind of God being used in judgement.

And we see God's judgement and justice on the day of Pentecost. The disciples were a small, reluctant, hesitant group. We're told that they numbered about 120 people, still meeting in secret, still facing opposition from the temple authorities. And the story that takes place immediately before the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was an election. The disciples had to elect somebody to replace Judas Iscariot. And I wonder if that process of election had stirred up memories of self-criticism and resentment and kind of sense of disquiet among the group, a sense of blame and finger-pointing again, which needed to be healed. Those cobwebs needed to be blown away. We understand from our own election processes how passions can be inspired by elections.

And when the violent rushing wind of the Holy Spirit blows, the Spirit fulfils what Jeremiah and Isaiah were talking about. The wind blows away the cobwebs of any lingering fear, doubt, or unbelief among the disciples, blows away any lingering sense of criticism or guilt, purifying the group and uniting them as one, just as Jesus had prayed for. And here therefore is judgement, forgiveness, cleansing, and healing. And it is a fact that the Holy Spirit only gets poured out upon the church when there is unity and healing and forgiveness, and when there is no blame or guilt or criticism.

And those opposed to the mission of Jesus are also judged. As the windows are thrown open and the disciples begin to preach in every language, the people can understand, we can see now that nothing is going to silence the word of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By the Spirit, the Gospel will be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Nothing will ever be the same again.

So the opposition, those who criticise, those who say they're drunk, the opposition is confounded and dumbfounded as the face of the earth is renewed. When in the Old Testament the wind brought the plague of locusts, as described in Exodus, that plague was part of the process of setting God's people free. Later on in the story, they come to the Red Sea, and Moses raises his staff, and the wind of God blows, and the waters of the Red Sea are parted, and God's people are set free, liberated.

And that now also happens at Pentecost. The people of God are set free by the Spirit blowing amongst them. The shutters of the windows are literally blown off in true Michael Caine fashion, and the people of God, the apostles, are set free. So there's cleansing and there's unifying and there's judgement, and then the Spirit brings life. When we encounter the Spirit in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit brings life. In the story of Genesis chapter 1, verse 2, the earth was a formless void, the darkness covered the face of the deep, but a wind from God swept over the face of the waters, and God said, 'Let there be light.' So life begins with the breath of God. And later in chapter 2 of Genesis, we read, 'The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.' Only when humankind has the breath of God within him is he fully alive.

In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of a valley full of dry bones, and they are God's people, the people of Israel, but they're dry lifeless skeletons, until God says to the prophet, 'Thus says the Lord God, come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they might live.' And then the prophet describes a rattling as the bones come together and begin to live. So the Holy Spirit is a gift of life, and that too we see amongst the disciples. They were still, before they received the Holy Spirit, hesitant, constrained, restricted. But after they receive the Holy Spirit, they are unleashed, filled with new life, filled with new wine, filled with new energy.

So life, a gift of the Spirit. I remember once some years ago coming home on a car ferry from France. There was a very violent wind, and it was a very exciting voyage. And Irene at the time was expecting our first son, Thomas. She was most uncomfortable, and we couldn't wait to get off that ship. And we've often wondered if that violent wind and those stormy waves account for the excitable and high-energy personality that is our son Thomas. New life unleashed upon the world with high energy by the breath of God.

So I hope that as individuals we don't feel too storm-tossed by circumstances, but there may be cobwebs that we would like to offer to the Lord to be blown away, things that we need to let go of and leave behind, things that maybe hold us, things that we can be released from and from which healing can be found. Maybe there can be a sense that we would like to receive God's judgement within us, cleansing us, making us new, setting us free to live without any burdens of guilt or blame or shame. And today is the day to pray for the Spirit of God to breathe afresh into our lives to achieve those things.

And often, as a church community, maybe here, maybe around the world, maybe in our country, in diocese, there is always need for healing and forgiveness and judgement within the church as a group, honesty that's necessary if the Holy Spirit is to work among us and lead us into new things. So we might pray, where do we need as a church to have our cobwebs blown away and for the life-giving Spirit of God to bring new life? We can pray for that this week and today.

And then the gift of life. Our PCC is going to meet on Wednesday and we're going to begin to think about what we might do together over the next few years. Now that T500 is behind us and Model Railway Exhibitions are behind us, what might we do next? What new life might we be led to? So our prayers for the Holy Spirit today can shape our future together and are important today as we prepare for that meeting.

So the prophet Isaiah says, of God, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. So the breath of God, his Holy Spirit, is poured out to cleanse us, to make us new, to give us life, to equip us, to use us in his service. So we can pray for that gift to allow us to respond in the next steps of our own personal journey with God and in our journey together as the church in this place, to blow away the cobwebs, to fill us with new energy, to set us free to live and to work to his praise and glory. Amen.