

Pentecost Year B 2021

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Today was known for many centuries among English speakers as Whitsun or Whitsunday until fairly recently, when in church circles it became known by its earlier name, Pentecost. This comes from the Greek for 50 days – in Jewish observance 50 days after Passover, and was a great festival of harvest and new life. New life is indeed still the theme of our celebration of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the first disciples at this time.

But let us start by remembering two God-fearing Jewish people. Mary, a young girl in Nazareth: Nicodemus who came to visit Jesus under cover of darkness.

Mary is visited by Gabriel, the archangel. She responds to the angelic presence – a sign of God’s intervention in her life - with trepidation and with a wholesome dose of common sense, when Gabriel announces that she will conceive and bear a son. How can this be with no earthly father in evidence? Gabriel says that the Holy Spirit will be the source of new life within her. She accepts that this is possible. Her cousin, Elizabeth, we are told is also filled with the Holy Spirit when she sees Mary and exclaims, “Blessed are you among women”

Nicodemus is altogether different. He seeks out this young man who he understands to be a teacher who comes from God. But as he listens to Jesus talking about being born again, born of the Spirit, he fails to comprehend. How can this be? He becomes argumentative, rather than accepting as Mary had been. You can almost hear the exasperation of Jesus that one learned in the Hebrew scriptures should be so obtuse. For the scriptures in many places speak of the Spirit of God: and we need to remember that the Hebrew word means spirit, breath and wind.

The spirit or breath of God is understood in the Old Testament as creative - from the very start of time, as in the great creation stories.

It also breathes life into human kind. God breathes into Adam and he becomes a living being.

It brings new life from death – most dramatically in the vision of Ezekiel of the Valley of Dry Bones. (ch.37)

The prophet is told by God to say to the bones, “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.” When the prophet did so the breath came into the dead “and they lived, and stood upon their feet, a vast multitude.” New life on the very grandest of scales.

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, is also seen as bringing good news and empowering his servants. Isaiah (ch 61) writes, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....” The passage is of course well known to us as Our Lord read it aloud in the synagogue, commenting that now this had been fulfilled in their hearing. (Luke 4: 16-21)

The prophets also envisaged a time when the spirit would be poured out on all flesh to use the words of Joel: not just on the religious specialists or a chosen few, but on all – young and old, men and women and even on slaves. (Joel 2:2 8-9)

The accounts of Pentecost in the Christian scriptures pick up all these themes and much more symbolism from the Old Testament. Tongues of fire for example echo the story of Moses and the Burning Bush, and the protective flame by night as the Israelites fled Egypt, as well as the fiery presence on the mountain where Moses meets God. Speaking in many languages so all might hear the good news is a reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel when the emergence of many different languages had divided people against people.

The in-spiring, the breathing into the disciples of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost brings new life in two main ways:

It literally creates a new community: it revives and reforms the tiny group of disciples, turning them into the core of a new worshipping community who care for each other, preach the good news, and are sure they are guided by the Holy Spirit in the decisions they take.

It transforms the lives of individual believers who are marked with the name and sign of Christ and begin to grow in his likeness as they sense his spirit deep within their hearts. They experience true conversion of heart and mind, a new creation.

Both these aspects of inspiring are important for us, for they raise two big questions about our own times and experiences.

What should the church be?

How do we understand the Holy Spirit in our own lives?

The first of these – what should the church be? – is particularly important as we move from the pandemic with all its curtailment of what we normally expect the church to be. There is already a lot of discussion about this in the church – and often a deeply disquieting note that many people with influence seem to think that the church can be run like a business – cutting costs, streamlining activities, making virtual connections at the expense of real human interaction. Whatever the church is, it is not a business operation – its goal is not to make money or gather in as many recruits as possible; it is not to provide worship akin to modern entertainment. The church is fundamentally a worshipping community – a group of people who gather to praise God for the great mystery of his love and our redemption. Our deepest meeting point is when we gather round the Lord's Table and remember his gift of his own life, his body and his blood, and when we hear his Word read aloud and expounded. From that flows its other characteristics – preaching the gospel or good news, and serving people in God's world. If any of these three characteristics is missing – gathering for worship, preaching the gospel, serving others – then something is very wrong with the church. We need to pray that in these difficult times our leaders are guided by these principles which first brought the church together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit – and we need to hold them to account.

The second question the story of Pentecost raises for us is how we understand the work of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. As I have said before from the pulpit, I sense that many good and devout Christians are perplexed and sometimes made to feel substandard or even guilty by the account of the first Pentecost. The experience of Pentecost-type charism by some Christians – like speaking in tongues – may make us wonder if we truly have the Spirit's presence in our lives if we do not do this sort of

thing. But very soon after the first Pentecost Christian communities were considering this – and Paul had some very strong things to say about the fruits of the Spirit. Writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. Ch.13) he reminds them that the one Spirit is manifested in a variety of gifts – preaching, teaching, healing, prophesying as well as working miracles and speaking with tongues. All these are given for the proper functioning of the Body of Christ. But as he wrote at the end of this exposition they should all strive for the greatest gift of all – and that is Love. Then follows the great chapter on Love which most of us could recite. “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love” To the final verse, “And now faith, hope and love abide, thee three; and the greatest of these is love.”

It is notable that Paul cites characteristics of lives marked by love which are anything but flashy, noisy and demonstrative: they are patience, kindness, putting others first, rejoicing in all good and in truth. In another of Paul’s letter, to the Galatians, he spells out in graphic detail the difference between lives lived according to the desires and standards of the flesh, unredeemed human life, and the fruits of the Spirit visible in lives lived according to the spirit of Christ.

(Galatians, ch.5) “...the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Obviously we all sin and fail when judged against this list. But we should be in no doubt that Christ lives his life within us through the power and abiding presence of his Spirit. Deep within the human heart of those who love him he works to transform us and the well springs of our lives.

This is the new life to which the accounts of Pentecost testify – abundant outgiving and outgoing life. Or in the words the writer of John’s gospel gives to Jesus, after his teaching that he is the good shepherd: “I am come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10: 10).