

Readings for the Feast of Pentecost

5th June 2022

First Reading: Acts 2:1-21

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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

Second Reading: Romans 8:14-17

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if we in fact suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Gospel: St John 14:8-17

Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

A Reflection for the Feast of Pentecost

This Sunday, as well as being Pentecost, one of the great festivals of Jewish and Christian traditions, we also have the national celebrations for Her Majesty the Queen's platinum jubilee. Whatever one's opinion of constitutional monarchy as a form of governance – and a quick look around the world amply demonstrates that no form of governance is without its flaws – this is a remarkable milestone. For sure, the royal family has had its ups and downs during her reign, but she has demonstrated a commitment and integrity in her life of service to this country and the Commonwealth that few would be able to match.

On Tuesday morning, in BBC Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day', the Venerable Liz Adegunle, one of the Queen's chaplains spoke about the jubilee, reminding listeners that 'jubilee' has its origins in the Old Testament. Jubilee was the culmination of the Sabbath principle: the Sabbath day was a day of rest every seventh day; the Sabbath year was a year of rest every seventh year (from which we get the idea of a sabbatical), and the Year of Jubilee, the fiftieth year, came after seven Sabbath years.

In the year of Jubilee, people were released from debt and slavery, land was restored to its original owners, it was a year of rest for the people and the land, and families were reunited. It was a time of restoration, reconciliation and renewal, most importantly of relationships with God, with one another and with creation. In the reality of a broken world, it modelled a way to live well, bringing people together in community, caring for the most disadvantaged and providing a fresh start. And maybe a few of those ancient priorities are also recognised in this weekend's platinum jubilee celebrations.

The Day of Pentecost, sometimes referred to as the birthday of the church, was also a fresh start. Jesus' followers were empowered by the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised they would be given throughout his ministry, and particularly, as we heard last week, just before his ascension. If you remember, last week, in both the Gospel reading and the passage from Acts, his followers were instructed to wait in Jerusalem until they had received the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts, Jesus tells them 'you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'.

Today's Gospel reading from John is part of the Farewell Discourse of that Gospel. The passage we have just heard comments on the close inter-relationship of God the Father and God the Son, and then promises the Holy Spirit who will be a continuation of Jesus' own presence with his followers. One of the Greek words used for the Holy Spirit here, *parakletos*, which is translated as 'Advocate' in verse 16, actually has a range of meanings: intercessor, mediator, advocate, helper, counsellor, comforter, giving an indication of the wide-ranging impact of the Spirit. But the evangelist also uses another Greek word too, *pneuma*, translated in verse 17 as Spirit, which can also mean wind or breath, something we sense or feel rather than see. So Jesus describes the promised Holy Spirit as a presence that

the disciples will feel to be with them, who will comfort, help and counsel them, and intercede and mediate for them with the Father.

Just as the year of jubilee brought freedom from debt and slavery for God's people, so the gift of the Holy Spirit brings a sense of security to Jesus' followers that frees them to speak out powerfully and act truthfully in accordance with God's will, despite the opposition that they will face. They will fulfil what Jesus prophesied in verse 12 of the Gospel, that, empowered by the Spirit, his followers will continue Jesus' works and even do greater works. We see the beginning of this in today's passage from Acts as Jesus' followers start to prophesy in many languages, and then as Peter starts to address the crowds. This is the opening of a longer address in which Peter explains all that God has done through Jesus.

The idea that the Spirit brings freedom is also seen in the passage from Romans. Today's reading is part of a passage in which Paul urges people to choose the way of life, and the assurance of salvation. Here he tells them that the Holy Spirit is not one that enslaves people, one that creates a sense of fear: fear was the characteristic of the old life, enslavement to sin, which could not be escaped by our own efforts and so was without hope for the future. Instead, he says that the Spirit of God identifies us as children of God who can look forward with confidence to salvation as co-heirs with Christ.

So Pentecost and the year of jubilee have both freedom from past bondage and the opportunity of a fresh start in common. A third factor that they have in common is a sense of inclusiveness. I mentioned earlier that the year of jubilee reunited families and brought people together in community. In the Old Testament, this referred to the people of Israel, but throughout those scriptures, there is also that sense of looking forward to the time when God's message of salvation will go out to the ends of the earth. And last week, we heard Jesus declare that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed ... to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Today's passage from Acts emphasises the inclusive action of the Holy Spirit. There is that long list of nationalities represented in Jerusalem, a list that strikes fear into the heart of all readers at Pentecost. It is representative of 'every nation under heaven' as the Jews in Jerusalem are described in verse 5. And it is perhaps a slightly ironic touch that those who are proclaiming the message are Galileans – Galilee was seen as a rural backwater by devout Jews, and they often looked down on Galileans. But it was through them that the Holy Spirit enabled people of all nations to hear the good news of God's deeds of power.

Peter explains how this a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel – the time of God's salvation has come and his audience is challenged to accept the Gospel message and be saved. Joel's prophecy also indicates the inclusive nature of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit will be poured out on all people: men and women, young and old, slaves and free.

It is through the working of the Holy Spirit in those first followers of Jesus, and countless others down the centuries, that the message of the Gospel has come down to our own generation. That same Holy Spirit still brings a fresh start, freedom and inclusion and is a gift to all of us as we in turn play our part in passing it on. Sometimes it may come as a rushing wind and tongues of fire, all noise and drama as on the day of Pentecost, but more often I find it comes gentle as a breath, often when we least expect it.

Her Majesty, the Queen has spoken on many occasions about her Christian faith and of how, in her life of service, she has drawn strength and inspiration from it. On this day of Pentecost and in this year of jubilee, may the Holy

Spirit inspire us too to speak out boldly and act truthfully in accordance with God's will, even in the times where we may face difficulty or opposition.