

Readings for the Feast of Pentecost

28th May 2023

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: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Gospel: St John 20:19-23

It was evening on the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

A Reflection for the Feast of Pentecost

As many of you will know, Rev'd Val, a Lutheran priest working in the Anglican Church in Canada visited us this week. Although she was unable to meet many of you due to the timing of her visit, I was able to show her some of our beautiful area and tell her about how the congregations of the Scottish Episcopal Church are church in this particular corner of the world. And I heard something of her own church in Winnipeg in central Canada, a city church in an area that is largely very flat but with lakes and forests nearby. Our ministries are in contrasting physical situations but, as all churches are, both are centred on people.

In my experience, at least on a good day, when clergy describe their churches to one another, it is not particularly about what they look like (the buildings or the people!), or even much about the demographics of the congregation. It is about how the church is church in that particular place, the opportunities and challenges it faces, the gifts it shares and the characteristics it displays as the body of Christ.

The worldwide body of Christ is made up of many different church groupings and denominations; and each denomination in turn is made up of many different congregations; and each congregation is made up of many different individuals. Each individual, congregation and denomination is unique. We each have our own spirits, our own personalities, our own gifts that make us who we are and contribute to the whole. And as Christians, as individuals, congregations and denominations, who we are should bear the stamp of the Holy Spirit, from whom all that we are and do should spring forth.

Today, on the feast of Pentecost, we think about the coming of that Holy Spirit, the gift that Jesus promised to his followers. In the readings, we have two different accounts of that coming of the Spirit.

Our Gospel reading is part of a longer passage we heard recently, on the Sunday after Easter. In it, John describes Jesus coming to the disciples on the evening of the first Easter. Despite the testimony of Mary that she had seen the risen Jesus, they remained fearful, hiding behind locked doors. Jesus came to bring peace, to calm their fears. And the Holy Spirit was bestowed on them as gently as a breath, in the privacy of a locked room.

The contrast with Luke's account in Acts is stark. It is set at the Jewish festival of Shavuot or Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover, when many people have come to Jerusalem from far and wide. The day is significant because this Jewish festival, although originally a thanksgiving for the first of the wheat harvest, had become associated with the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, a Law that the church came to understand as being fulfilled by Jesus. We

can imagine the bustle and noise of the crowds in Jerusalem. And the Holy Spirit came loudly, disruptively, publicly – a rushing wind and flames of fire. It had an effect so dramatic that it quickly drew a crowd.

Two different accounts and, yet, for me at least they match not only different people's experiences of the Holy Spirit but also my own experiences of the Holy Spirit at different times – sometimes peaceful, reassuring, comforting, at other times dramatic, disruptive, turning things upside down. However, in both accounts, the effect on the disciples was transformative and they were empowered to go out and spread the good news.

In the Gospel reading, the risen Jesus reiterates their commission: 'as the Father has sent me, so I send you'. In Acts, the commission came earlier, in the passage we heard last week describing Jesus' ascension into heaven. On that occasion, the disciples were told to wait for 'the promise of the Father' when they would be 'baptised by the Holy Spirit' and 'receive power' And they were instructed: 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'.

The Holy Spirit changes everything. The disciples were to continue the work of Jesus in the world in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the gifts that the Spirit bestows. I came across a commentary on this passage by the theologian David Bartlett who says that the gift of the Spirit is not so much for the sake of the church as for the whole world, this being shown by the profusion of languages in which people heard the disciples speaking.

The passage that we heard from Corinthians tells us more about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It's worth noticing the first sentence: 'No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' – it looks almost as if it is something separate before Paul gets onto subject of gifts, but I think that perhaps we should regard it as the key to what follows. To say "Jesus is Lord" is an expression of faith and faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit through which we should exercise those other gifts.

The church in Corinth that Paul was writing to wasn't in a good state, divided and confused. Here, Paul emphasises the unity of God's people: one Spirit, one Lord, one body. They are united in their faith. But it is unity in diversity: the one Spirit gives varieties of gifts that can be used in different ways to serve others. The list mentioned here is not exhaustive; elsewhere Paul speaks of other gifts and there are many others that could be added to those listed. But the point about them all is that different gifts are given to individuals to be used for the common good, not just for themselves.

We all have our own God-given gifts and Pentecost is a good time to think about them. What are yours? It's very easy to be self-deprecating about the gifts we can offer, or to think that someone else would be much better at something than us. Indeed, it is often easier to see and appreciate the gifts of others than our own. And it's easy to be overwhelmed by our own busyness, by all that we 'have' to do (one of my own specialisms). Do we have a gift that we have overlooked or suppressed? Could our gifts be better used? How could we use our gifts differently for the benefit of others, for our church and community? Is God's Holy Spirit nudging us towards something new?

The Holy Spirit is given to us all in baptism as a gift for our whole lives. Pentecost is a time to reflect on how that Spirit influences who we are, our very being, and to think about what gifts we have been given that we could use, or use better, for the building up of God's kingdom.