

## Readings for the Feast of Pentecost

19<sup>th</sup> May 2024

### 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 8:22-27

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Jesus spoke to his disciples: “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

### **A Reflection for the Feast of Pentecost**

Last week, Fr David started his reflection for Ascension Sunday with a poem: *As king fishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame* by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Poetry can paint word pictures for us that help us dig deeper into our faith, and today I also want to start with a poem. This is one of Malcolm Guite’s sonnets from his book *Sounding the Seasons*, entitled simply *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.

For me, this is a gentler account of the dramatic entrance of the Holy Spirit that we read of in Acts, yet with the references to wind and the tongues of fire and water all present and carefully interwoven. The wind is linked to breath, just as the original Hebrew word used can be translated as either wind or breath, and then to praise. The tongues of fire that touched each person present are connected to the different tongues or languages that they then start speaking and which enable the Gospel message to spread to all nations with its message of love. And the

reference to water I understand as a reference to the waters of baptism, Pentecost being that other element of baptism, baptism with the Holy Spirit. There is also the connection to the whole of creation as it says: 'The earth herself awakens to her maker...'. Renewal becomes a possibility.

The passage from Acts is much more dramatic as the Holy Spirit makes his or her entrance. As we heard in today's Gospel, Jesus promised his followers that, after his death, resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit would come to them. As the disciples had gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, the Holy Spirit also arrived, unannounced and forceful. The Spirit was indiscriminate, filling the whole house and resting on each person present such that they all started to speak in languages previously unknown to them. It caused such a commotion that a crowd gathered, wondering what was happening. We are told that they bewildered and astonished at what they saw and heard.

In response, Peter stands up and declares that what they are witnessing is fulfilment of prophecy, that the Holy Spirit can be poured out on everyone to renew and transform their lives. God's people are dreaming dreams and seeing visions, they are imagining a better world, a glimpse of God's kingdom. It comes across as a noisy and joyful, if somewhat chaotic, scene.

It can also seem a bit foreign to our, usually, more reserved approach to matters of faith. Maybe we're not quite ready for this in the same way that we feel those from charismatic and Pentecostal traditions might be. But, if we are ever tempted to think that the Holy Spirit is 'ours' in some way, or even 'not so much ours', this passage says 'Not so!' The Holy Spirit is not limited to any particular group of people, or indeed to any one Sunday of the year such as this one. The Spirit does what the Spirit does, and we need to be open to that and prepared to shift our perspective.

If this picture of a disruptive Spirit that turns everything upside down is making you feel a little uncomfortable, then I refer you back to that gentler picture of the Spirit in Malcolm Guite's sonnet. For it is also true that the Spirit works in different ways in different circumstances.

After Easter, I watched the latest series of the TV programme *Pilgrimage*. A group of celebrity pilgrims with different faiths and beliefs, journey along a pilgrim route, meeting various people and discussing the things they experience and their beliefs as they walk.

In this series, they were travelling along the North Wales Pilgrim's Way, which links a series of ancient churches and holy wells connected to various Celtic saints, on their way to Bardsey Island, a site of pilgrimage for 1500 years since St Cadfan founded a community there. In one of the episodes, they met a priest of the Church in Wales who spoke about how, for the Celts, their faith was entwined with the beauty and wonder of the natural world in a way that finds echoes with many people today. She spoke of the Celtic idea of a 'thin' place, a place where the sense of the barrier between heaven and earth, the spiritual and the earthly, is thinner than elsewhere, a place where people experience a greater sense of the awesomeness of God or the awesomeness of creation.

In Scotland, Iona, and just across the border in Northumberland, Lindisfarne, are both often referred to as 'thin places'. Applecross, the ancient site of St Maelrubha's monastery, has also been described to me as a thin place, and there are many other ancient holy sites across the land that can be similarly described.

Such places are where the Holy Spirit speaks to us in quieter, gentler ways. But I don't think they necessarily need to be places with some connection to the holy people of yesteryear. For the Celts, the connection between the spiritual and the earthly ran deep, and they had a deep sense of the presence of God in every aspect of their lives and in the ordinary places they lived. Esther de Waal, in her book *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, says that for the Celts, as in the monastic tradition, there was no separation between praying and living and working; these different aspects of their lives flowed into one another, and they had prayers, just as they had poetry and songs, for every part of life. She wrote that they are '...ordinary people, just like me, living very busy lives, and yet prayer is the undercurrent of whatever they are doing.'

In this tradition, I also see a connection to today's passage from Romans which tells us: 'that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words'. It's as if Paul is telling us that the Spirit praying through us is like a sigh, the gentle rhythm of breathing in and out, an integral part of life as we go about our daily tasks.

However we prefer to relate to the Holy Spirit, or perhaps more accurately however God has planned that we should encounter the Holy Spirit, we all need those places of encounter that allow God's Holy Spirit to have proper influence over our lives. It's worth asking ourselves, where are our thin places? Where do we feel most connected to God, and what can we do to nurture the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives?