

## Readings for the Feast of Pentecost

24<sup>th</sup> May 2026

### 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.

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**

*from Ven John Green*

#### **ON PENTECOST**

Words from the hymn, Christ is the King, O friends rejoice!:

They with a faith forever new  
followed the King, and round him drew  
thousands of faithful servants true.

O Christian women, Christian men,  
all the world over, seek again  
the way disciples followed then.

Have we lost something? Reading the accounts of the early church in the books of the New Testament, beginning with the Acts of the Apostles, you can't help wondering. Entering the Church of England as a teenager, I was attracted by the Charismatic Movement of the 1960s which had a vision of re-discovering that living faith.

As a fledgling organist, I developed a love-hate relationship with the Church; I was attracted by grand buildings and the liturgies, art and music that went with them, but I couldn't help feeling that something about the life of the Church was fundamentally at odds with its origins. Indeed, I've never lost that feeling of tension; like many Christians, I find it difficult to reconcile the elitism and wealth that characterises the mainstream Church with either the teaching of Jesus, or the faith of the first Christians.

Lately, though, I've come to believe that the Church might be much better if it wasn't made up of people like me. What I've realised, is the contradictions I see all too clearly in the life of the Church, are contradictions that are present in me. I loved the equality and sharing that seemed to underpin the life of the first Christians; but I liked 'good' music and wanted 'faith' to be intellectually fulfilling. I liked the *idea* of a group of people whose love for each other was so deep that they shared everything they had with each other, but I wanted to be able to own things, like a car, and aspired to buy my own house. I wanted a Church that would spend money on glorifying God in ways I found edifying; big, expensive stone buildings with fine organs accompanying grand liturgy; a Church that valued intellect and scholarship over mere emotional conviction. But I also wanted a Church that was true to its roots, and could own the revolutionary words of *The Magnificat*: "*He has shown strength with his arm: he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their seat: and has exalted the humble and meek. He has filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he has sent empty away.*"

If I have gained any wisdom with age, it is, perhaps, that we tend to blame institutions – the Church and the political establishment to name but two – for failings of which we are all guilty and which we all share as human beings. Throughout my life as an individual Christian and a minister within the Church, I've walked the theological tightrope of wanting to have my cake and eat it; and I get rather upset with anything that threatens to make me fall off! But to be fair to myself, I don't think I'm alone, and it doesn't simply apply to religion. For instance, dissatisfaction with public services is wide spread, be it with the state of our roads, delays in getting medical treatment or policing; but there isn't a matching enthusiasm for increased taxation. Theories and ideas which scape goat the poorest gain much more traction than those which propose sharing the burden across all our shoulders. While the institutional indifference of a wealthy Church to inequality and the plight of the poor might worry me, I've been most dismayed by the hatred, cruelty and self-centredness I've seen expressed at a personal level in an institution supposedly dedicated to the propagation of self-giving love; but that's the reality of human life. The Church would indeed be glorious if it could be built with perfect materials – sadly, God only has us at his disposal!

As a world-weary archdeacon, I can't help wondering if our envy of the early Church isn't a case of looking back through rose-tinted spectacles. While the pages of the New Testament might give us some envious pictures of life in the early Church, there are enough hints – particularly in Paul's letters – that it wasn't all peace and light! We live in a very different world and culture from the first Christians; but I'm pretty sure that the strengths and weaknesses of us humans aren't that different. In particular, I think it's a great mistake to see us as having lost something that the first Christians had. Put it this way: if I was going to write an account of the life of the Northwest Charge for a recruitment brochure, I wouldn't spend all my time listing our weaknesses and shortcomings! That wouldn't be dishonest; if you feel something is good, it's natural to be more open to its good points than its bad. The books of the New Testament don't pretend to give a clinically accurate account of the life of the first Christians; they want to celebrate the best and want to share the Gospel – the good news. Alleluia!

So, what of the accounts of the giving of the Holy Spirit and its role in the early Church set for today? Am I a deficient minister of the Gospel if I can't preach in twenty languages at once, or are we a failing church if we don't have all the gifts listed by St Paul? No, we are simply imperfect, human ones.

To understand Pentecost, I think we need to hold on to two perspectives. Theologically, I want to wind back to the very beginning of John's Gospel. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* Famous words, often used to explain what it is we celebrate at Christmas. The punchline comes at verse 14: *"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."*

The central, intellectually scandalous, idea of the Christian Faith is that in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, God somehow fully entered into human life; God is not some unimaginably remote being who we can never hope to relate to, but chooses to empty himself to be not simply close to us – but be one *with* us and one *of* us. In his letter to the Philippians, St Paul quotes an early Christian Hymn which says it all: *"...Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness."*

The second perspective is to recognise where this narrative comes in the lives of Jesus' followers. Whatever happened exactly – and the two accounts we've heard today differ in the detail – it marks a change so profound that

Pentecost is often referred to as the birth of the Church. At this point, Jesus' followers are a frightened and dispirited bunch, meeting in secret, behind locked doors in fear of being hunted down. But from then on, they grasp the reality and significance of Jesus' resurrection, and that they are called to continue his mission to the world. The even more intellectually scandalous idea of Pentecost, is that God was not only present among us through The Word made flesh, but that somehow the same God is actually manifest in us through the Holy Spirit.

It is easy to tie ourselves in knots conjuring up a theology that attempts to explain the inner workings of a God who can, at once, be the all-powerful, eternal Creator, empty himself to live a human life and, subsequently, make himself known to us and through us in everyday life. It's equally easy to become preoccupied with the details of the coming of the Spirit, and the accompanying signs. I don't pretend to even begin to understand the theology and I'm not particularly bothered about how the historic event is recorded. What really matters to me is the real and self-evident change – the fact that a demoralised frightened group was transformed into a force that would literally change history; and the belief that the same transformative love, can and is working through us today.

I think the readings for today say three simple things to us, ordinary fallible people called to do extraordinary things.

First, God's Spirit empowers us to bear witness. It doesn't need to be in strange tongues, it doesn't even need to be in words, and it certainly doesn't need to be miraculous. I believe that imperfect as I am – and that is very imperfect – my words and my actions can be used to communicate God's love for the world, to the world.

Second, we're on a mission! Being a Christian isn't just about me and my God – it's about reconciling humanity to its Creator and to one another. We don't have the Spirit to indulge ourselves, but to bring others to Christ.

Thirdly, we're not in competition; on the contrary, we need one another to fulfil our calling. Dare I say, we're called to be a *laboratory of love* rather than *riven by rivalry*!

But if there's one message I want to give you it is Pentecost is as real today as it was around 33AD, but it's substance is not about signs and wonders, or miracles and speaking in tongues; and it's not about a time when the first Christians had something precious we've lost today. It's about the ability of God to take frail and imperfect human beings – like the disciples were then, and we are today – and build them into a Church that witnesses to his love and power. All we need to do is allow God to equip us not to do the outwardly miraculous, but to transform our simple, everyday actions into miracles of love.