

Sermon for Pentecost, 23rd May 2021

Mother Emma

Readings: Acts 2:1-21, Romans 8:22-27, John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Many, if not all, Anglican churchgoers may be aware that today is the Feast of Pentecost – what used to be known throughout the UK as Whitsunday. Some will be aware that in theological terms, this is the third great Festival of the Christian year, to be considered every bit as important as Christmas or Easter.

The level of church attendance for this feast-day, though, would confirm that its place in our cultural consciousness has receded enormously since the days when Whit week was given as one of the official holidays for all labourers – a pause in the relentless work of the agricultural year. Whitsun celebrations were a big affair, with Whit walks around the parish boundaries, great services, fetes, fairs and pageants. Multiple baptisms were often celebrated at Whitsun, as people remembered the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the name Whitsunday itself is thought to derive from the white garments worn by the newly baptised. The Church held the baptism candidates in prayer, asking that they, like us, might receive the gift of God's grace and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to guide and protect them throughout their lives.

But what exactly do we mean when we talk about the Holy Spirit?

As we heard in our reading from Acts, the traditional narrative of Pentecost recalls that ten days after Jesus' Ascension into Heaven, the disciples were gathered together, and experienced an extraordinary inrushing of spiritual confidence, energy, trust and excitement. They described it in terms of the sound of a violent wind, of tongues of flame seen on the heads of their companions, and of an uncontrollable desire to share the story of Jesus' Life, Death and Resurrection with everyone they met, a message which suddenly seemed communicable even across language barriers.

However we understand or imagine the coming of the Spirit, it certainly changed the lives of the disciples for ever – from a group of disheartened and anxious men into the apostles who would risk their lives travelling to the furthest ends of the known world to share the Good News with others. And Jesus' promise was that the Spirit of God would be present with us here on earth from that day on.

Today we give thanks for God's giving of that Spirit who remains with us two thousand years later, inspiring our own learning, prayer and worship, and encouraging us still to share the story of our faith with others, and live out the life which Jesus taught.

Right at the beginning of Creation, we are told that when there was nothing but darkness and chaos, the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. It seems that the Holy Spirit played a central role in the very inception of our planet, in the world with all its gifts which have been given into our stewardship, and indeed, was part of the very beginning and source of life itself.

In the Creed, we refer to the Holy Spirit as "the Lord, the Giver of Life", and this is only one of a multitude of names which appear throughout Scripture – the Comforter, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth.

We are told that the Spirit intercedes for us; dwelling within the heart of God's people, breathing life into us, convicting us of sin, and guiding us into all righteousness; the Spirit teaches us and witnesses to our status as children of God.

The Holy Spirit IS the living presence of God here on earth with us today. We know this, we proclaim it every Sunday as part of our confession of faith, yet many of us struggle to identify the work of the Spirit in our day to day lives.

In his letters, Paul describes the fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Where we see these manifested in society around us, there we are discerning traces of the Spirit's work in the world.

But our second reading reminded us that the Spirit is also there when we find ourselves unable or unwilling to turn to God in prayer, "interceding for us with sighs too deep for words." The Spirit of God knows our hearts and minds, bringing our needs, our cries for help, our doubts and fears before the throne of God.

Christ has prayed for each one of us – as he did for each of the disciples, that we may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For our part, we are called to be constantly aware of that Spirit's presence with us, comforting, sustaining, and guiding us, praying for us to the Father and clearly discernible in the actions and lives of so many around us.

There is a special Pentecost liturgy used in some parishes, as the Church is commissioned once again to go out in the light and power of the Spirit, as it did that first Pentecost. It evokes what we are called to do, not so much as individuals, but as a single, united body, sharing in and spreading the transformative power of God's love.

In this time of recovery and of re-orientating ourselves, as we re-encounter one another "in-person" or in community, I leave you with the questions posed in this Pentecost liturgy:

- Will you dare to walk into God's future, trusting him to be your guide?
- Will you dare to embrace each other and grow together in love?
- Will you dare to share your riches in common and minister to each other in need?
- Will you dare to pray for each other until your hearts beat with the longings of God?
- Will you dare to carry the light of Christ into the world's dark places?

By the Spirit's power, may we live out the faith we proclaim.

Amen.