

Surprising Spirit

5 June 2022 – Pentecost Sunday

READING Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

It's Pentecost when we remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church. Pentecost, comes 50 days after Easter.

It was like the beginning of the church.

The followers of Jesus were told to wait ... because they would receive a special gift from God on that first Pentecost day.

When that day came, the people were all gathered together – a bit like when we gather together on a Sunday.

Then there was the sound of wind, a strong wind ... and little flames of fire that rested on everyone ... it was all a bit mysterious ... but no-one was hurt.

In fact, the people suddenly knew that this was God's gift – lighting a small fire in their hearts. They got quite excited and wanted to tell everyone about how great God was and to tell them about Jesus. And just like that, the church was born.

God's Spirit still comes to us today, in lots of different ways. In the symbol of the Uniting Church you can see the flames of Pentecost at the centre. The flames also look a bit like a bird, which is how the Spirit came to rest on Jesus. Another word for the Spirit is breath ... we breathe in and breathe out ... and God's Spirit is that close to us it's like our own breath.

We're going to sing a song that describes various ways that the Spirit comes to us. The song uses the pronoun 'she' to talk about the Spirit because in Hebrew, the word for breath and Spirit – which is the same word **ruach** – is feminine.

BIBLE READING

Acts 10:1-48 The second Pentecost story

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a Roman centurion. He and all his

family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision of an angel who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!'

Cornelius stared at him in fear.

The angel said, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ...

About noon the following day, Peter went up on the roof to pray ... and fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.' The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Simon, three men are looking for you. Get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.'

Next day Peter started out with the three men, along with some of the believers from Joppa. When they arrived in Caesarea, Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ... Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ...

Then he began to speak: 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in Judea and in Jerusalem.

They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that

he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

MESSAGE Surprising Spirit

When we think about the future, we all have certain expectation and hopes ... perhaps about a new job or a new volunteering role ... perhaps for our children and grandchildren ... perhaps about how our new government will perform after the initial honeymoon effect wears off and difficult decisions must be made.



Reality often turns out to be different to our hopes ... sometimes we are disappointed, but sometimes things turn out way better than we expect. It's at transition times in our life that this issue of expectation is often strongest.

In Luke's story about the Jesus movement that we read about in the book of Acts, there is a key transition in the story as the baton is passed from Jesus to his followers. The hopes and expectations of Jesus' followers are set rather high as Jesus expands their vision by promising that

*they will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon them,
equipping them to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and
to the ends of the earth.*

This lofty vision had already been hinted at near the beginning of Luke's Gospel when elderly Simeon predicts that Jesus will be a light for revelation to the **Gentiles** and when John the Baptist predicts that **all of humanity** will see the salvation of God

that comes through Jesus.

Pentecost is the day when these promises and expectations begin to be fulfilled. As Luke tells the story in Acts 2, the Spirit falls on Jesus' followers with wind and flames and they start to speak boldly about God's deeds of



power in various languages to the crowd of Jews who have gathered in Jerusalem from all across the then known world. Peter then preaches a bold message about Jesus, a large number of people put their trust in Jesus and the church is born.

High expectations are met with an amazing outcome.

If we fast forward ten years, though, things have not gone as smoothly as the initial excitement of Pentecost may have suggested.



The church is now firmly established in Jerusalem and has started to spread the message into Samaria and other parts of Judea. There has been opposition from other Jewish groups and following the stoning of Stephen, a more active persecution starts.

Up to this point, one consistent feature of the emerging communities that follow the way of Jesus is that that are **practically all Jewish**. Christianity is very much a **sect within Judaism**. There seem to be no plans to take the message further afield and the idea of going to the ends of the earth is nowhere in view.

So we move to today's reading that I've called the **second Pentecost** story, which appears in Acts chapter 10. Luke obviously thought this was a vitally important story as he devotes a rather long chapter to it, then repeats most of the main points in the following chapter and summarises them again in chapter 15. So what happens and why is it so significant?

The two key players in the story are **Peter** and a Roman centurion named **Cornelius**. Each of them has a vision from God that leaves them somewhat confused. Cornelius is told to send for a man named Simon who is also called Peter – but without any further explanation as to why and what will result. He takes a step of faith and sends a small delegation to Joppa to try and find this



character called Peter.

Meanwhile Peter has a vision of clean and unclean animals and is told to kill and eat. Peter is disturbed by the vision, because as a Jew, he only ever ate what was considered 'clean' food. The voice in the vision tells him not to reject anything that God has declared clean. The delegation from Cornelius find Peter who is still grappling with what the vision means. He travels with them to the house of Cornelius ... slowly building up the tension and drama of the event.

Peter has a captive audience and basically shares a message about Jesus that he has been sharing with Jewish audiences for the past ten years. The difference and novelty this time is that the audience is nearly **all Gentile** – non-Jewish people – who have no expectation or hope in a Jewish Messiah. The only reason they are listening to Peter at all is the behind-the-scenes action of God's Spirit to bring the two groups together.

As Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household and they start speaking in other languages and praising God. Peter is smart enough to realise that this is exactly what happened ten years



earlier on the day of Pentecost. It was clearly God's Spirit at work – but this time at work in the hearts of these **non-Jewish** people.

Perhaps it's at that point that Peter's vision finally made sense to him ... God considered these people **clean** – even though they were Romans – as indicated by pouring out a visible sign of God's presence and acceptance of them. They are then baptised and become the latest followers of Jesus.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Peter goes back to Jerusalem to report what has happened. Rather than being thrilled with this latest development, however, the Jewish church in Jerusalem is critical of Peter – not because he shared the message of Jesus with these non-Jews but because he then **ate** with them. Old habits and prejudices die hard.

The new reality took some time to sink in. There wasn't a smooth transition from a Jewish faith community to a mixed Jewish-Gentile faith community – which in future decades would become a mostly Gentile or **non-Jewish** community.

The big issue to be grappled with – that makes us scratch our heads – is how will **Jewish** believers interact with **non-Jewish** believers ... can they share fellowship together, eat together, share in mission together? ... all without the Gentiles being forced to become Jews and follow the Jewish law. This hot issue comes to the fore in Paul's letter to the Galatians that we will explore over the next few weeks.

If we take a step back from the historical reverberations and ripples that this second Pentecost story set in motion, **what might we learn for today?**

First is that as the Creator and Sustainer, **God cares for all people** – and indeed for **all of creation** – and has a plan to embrace them and bless them. This plan involved the nation of Israel and then involved sending Jesus, who in turn sent the disciples to be a witness to the ends of the earth.

This same plan of God now involves **us**.

This plan ... or mission ... **is always to go *beyond***. It is sometimes called the **missio dei, the mission of God** ... where God goes beyond Godself in creating the world and then in calling Abraham and then the nation of Israel. In the person of Jesus, the plan goes beyond Israel as Jesus' followers are sent to the ends of the earth. This plan is energized and directed by God's Spirit.

We too are sent beyond the comfortable walls of the church. So when we think about our mission, it's important to think **beyond** the church and into the community ... and sometimes beyond our immediate community of Croydon.

In turning this plan into reality, **the initiative lies with God and with God's Spirit**, stirring us up to dream and imagine, and to go beyond what we may find comfortable. In the **first** Pentecost story in Acts chapter 2, the hopes of the Jesus community are met and exceeded. Many more people respond positively to their message than they were expecting.

In the **second** Pentecost story, God's plan meets human resistance and reticence. The church had grown somewhat comfortable in Jerusalem and it's only through a remarkable series of events – orchestrated by God's Spirit – that they come to grasp God's bigger vision for the future. I wonder if sometimes God has bigger plans for us that we are reluctant to see or to grasp.

Another lesson for us – as for the early church – is that while God accepts every person, **we actually find it quite difficult to embrace people who are *different* to us**. Most of us find it hard to accept change or to think that God might want us to share

what we treasure and value with others, including of course our faith but also our resources. It's where we need God's Spirit to help us to open our eyes to new possibilities and to change our thinking.

In the Scriptures, the role of the Spirit has many dimensions ... an active presence in creation, being a comforter and counsellor to Christians, equipping Christians for ministry and mission, leading us into faith and truth.

But in the stories of Pentecost, the role of the Spirit is as the **instigator** and **pioneer** of new ways of thinking, new ways of witness, leading the community onwards and outwards beyond its comfort zone into unexpected and challenging waters, disturbing, making people uncomfortable, opening eyes to new possibilities.

May we be ready – this day and every day – to hear and to embrace what God's Spirit may be whispering – or shouting – to us. Amen.