

The Spirit at Pentecost – bringing peace or disturbing the peace?

28 May 2023 - Pentecost

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Symbols of the Spirit ... breath, wind, fire, oil, stillness, living water, dove, power, inspiration, Counsellor, Comforter, truth speaker

BIBLE READINGS

John 7:37-39

On the last and greatest day of the festival of Booths in Jerusalem, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Acts 2:1-23, 32-33

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.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'

Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.'

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: 'Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

... and everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ...

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

MESSAGE



We are all enjoying the vibrant colours of autumn at the moment – the reds, oranges, gold, crimson ... a beautiful part of God’s creation.

We associate these same colours with Pentecost ... because they are also **flame colours** ... reminding us of the tongues of fire that rested on each of the disciples at

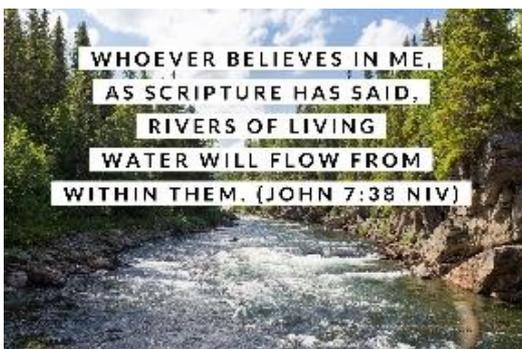


Pentecost ... a visible sign of the outpouring of God’s Spirit. Fire brings warmth, it may also bring destruction on a large scale (think bushfires), but in this case it brings inspiration to speak in different languages.



What attracts a crowd though is another sign – the strong **wind** – blowing like a gale from heaven ... like the strong winds we experienced a couple of days ago ... fierce, hard to ignore ... in this case it comes as a sign of God’s presence in power.

This is the **gift** Jesus has spoken about that will come from God when he returns to heaven. This gift of the Spirit is seen differently by the various writers in the New Testament. This is not surprising really. In our tradition, God is known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or perhaps as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. The point is that the Spirit is fully God - the presence and essence of God in the world - and we should not try to limit God to just one or two metaphors.



So in John’s Gospel that we have been exploring for most of the year so far, the giving of the Spirit is described in terms of **living water** that will well up within believers. This living water will bring life, eternal life – new hope – new direction – a new sense of identity and purpose – to people like the woman Jesus met at the well. I wonder where you feel **thirsty** and **dry** and need refreshing from God’s Spirit welling up within you today?

In Jesus' farewell instructions to the disciples in John's Gospel, there are multiple references to the giving of God's Spirit who is named as the **paracletos** - the Advocate or Counselor or Helper, the one who comes alongside us to encourage and comfort. The Spirit is also called the Spirit of truth, the one who will remind us of the words and message Jesus spoke.

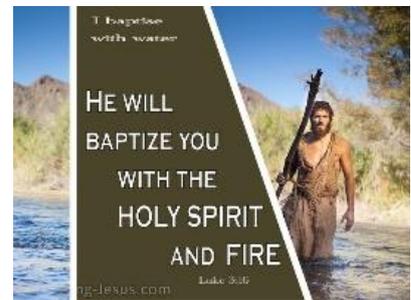


So I wonder if there are areas of your life where you need encouragement or comfort or to be pointed back to the ways of Jesus, areas where God's Spirit can be at work, welling up within you.

For Pentecost Sunday, the usual reading is taken from the book of Acts, as we heard this morning. This story of the Spirit being poured out, however, goes all the way back to John the Baptist and his teaching about Jesus that is recorded in all four of the Gospels.

In each case, John points to Jesus as the more powerful one to come. John says that while he baptises people with **water**, Jesus will baptise people with the **Holy Spirit**.

Matthew and Luke add that Jesus will baptise people with the Spirit **and with fire**. And so it turns out this way at Pentecost.



At the start of the book of Acts, Jesus reminds the disciples about this expectation ... that John baptised with **water**, but they will soon be baptised with the **Holy Spirit**. Unlike our practice of baptism where we pour a little water over someone's head, baptism for John meant a full **drenching** in the waters of the Jordan River.



So baptism in the Holy Spirit would imply a **drenching** in the Spirit, a complete **immersion** in the Spirit. Hence in the next chapter of Acts, it's no surprise that Pentecost is presented as this loud, full-on, immersive experience with a violent wind and tongues of flame. It was an experience that couldn't be ignored.

But the **purpose** of this baptism in the Spirit was to enable the disciples to **witness** to Jesus, starting from Jerusalem and spreading throughout the Roman world, eventually reaching to the heart of Rome itself.

In a nutshell this is the story of the book of Acts. So for the writer Luke, the gift of the Spirit is about **empowering** our witness, in both words and actions.



When the Spirit comes, the disciples all begin speaking excitedly about the mighty deeds of God, which attracts a crowd, and Peter then stands up and preaches an inspired message about Jesus. Luke tells us that 3,000 people put their faith in Jesus that day – so the Spirit inspires Peter to speak a powerful message and the listeners to really hear the message.

But it doesn't end there. The last part of the Pentecost story, which we didn't read today, describes the new Spirit filled church community that emerges – where people worship and pray together, where they generously share their belongings and wealth with the needy, where the hungry are fed and everyone is filled with joy. The Spirit inspires the disciples to **speak** about Jesus, but also to **act** in a compassionate way like Jesus.



So again I wonder where we might be feeling anxious or lacking energy in our witness – whether in words or our actions – and where we might ask God's Spirit to fill us afresh to inspire us.

Unfortunately, there's no time today to explore **Paul's** take on the Holy Spirit, except to note that for Paul the Spirit connects us intimately with the death and resurrection of Jesus, gives us gifts for ministry, and assures us that we are indeed loved by God and can rest secure as God's children. One important insight from Paul is that no-one misses out on the gift of God's Spirit. It is for every follower of Jesus. Luke makes the same comment in Acts.

I want to invite you now into a short meditation on who the Spirit is. We are going to sing one of my favourite songs about God's Spirit written by John Bell entitled *She sits like a bird*. *

Kathryn will lead us in singing the verses and in between each verse I will invite you into a brief meditation on an aspect of the Spirit picked up in each verse. In this song, the Spirit is described with **feminine** pronouns since the Hebrew word for Spirit is **ruach** which is feminine.

*She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters,
hovering on the chaos of the world's first day;
she sighs and she sings, mothering creation,
waiting to give birth to all the Word will say.*

Sitting, waiting.

Here we are, sitting and waiting.

We hear various noises and movements around us – faint traffic noise, the wind, bird calls

If we sit very still we can hear the sound of our own breathing – as air moves in and out of our lungs – nourishing us for living.

The Spirit was hovering over the unformed waters on the first day of creation ... as the wind or breath of God ... waiting to give shape to what God's Word – Jesus – would say.

The Spirit was there at creation, bringing God's dream to reality.

We sit and we wait. We too hover, ready to move – move by the power of breath in our bodies – move with the breath and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

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*She wings over earth, resting where she wishes,
lighting close at hand or soaring through the skies;
she nests in the womb, welcoming each wonder,
nourishing potential hidden to our eyes.*

Where do you go to get nourishment for your soul?

Perhaps you listen to music, or spend time with friends or go for a long walk, slowly taking in the sights and sounds and smells you normally rush past without taking them in.

Where does our energy and vitality come from?

From the food we eat ... but also from God's Spirit filling our body and soul with the presence of God.

This is often slow, steady work that we can't control.

Let us welcome God's hidden Spirit, nourishing us deeply.

*She dances in fire, startling her spectators,
waking tongues of ecstasy where dumbness reigned;
she weans and inspires all whose hearts are open,
nor can she be captured, silenced or restrained.*

God's Spirit was not to be restrained this particular evening.

People had gathered as usual to worship God, but when the worship ended, prayer began and people were laughing, some were crying, others were speaking words inspired by God's Spirit.

There was a presence in the space.

And one woman started dancing, elegantly, delightedly, with ecstasy.

Joy filled her body and her mind.

Dancing for God's pleasure, unrestrained, uninhibited.

*For she is the Spirit, one with God in essence,
gifted by the Saviour in eternal love;
she is the key opening the scriptures,
enemy of apathy and heavenly dove.*

She is the Spirit, Ruach, breath of God.

She is Sophia, wisdom of God, with God before the very beginning of time.

She shares the very essence of God.

She is with us always, opening our eyes, opening our hearts
to the words of God.

She is the gentle, peaceful dove bringing us comfort, enfolding us in eternal love.

She is the disturbing raging wild goose who never allows us to grow lazy,
prodding us on towards new love and new possibilities.

She is the enemy of apathy, always stirring us up to new life.