

SERMON FOR PENTECOST AT BSJ: 19 MAY 2024 (based on Acts 2:1-21 and John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15)

The Holy Spirit - God's gift that keeps on giving

Today marks the end of the Easter season, as we give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit and look ahead to the season of Trinity. In celebrating Pentecost, we stand on a threshold in the Church calendar, and indeed that idea of being at a crossover point between what has gone before and what is to come looms large in both of today's readings. Hearing Christ's reassuring promise, in John's Gospel, of the coming of the Spirit, alongside Luke's telling of the fulfilment of that promise in Acts, we gain some insight into the purpose of God's amazing gift.

In John, Jesus is preparing his team of eleven apostles for what lies ahead, in much the same way as a football manager might give a pep talk to his players before a game. Jesus has trained and coached his squad, but he won't be with them on the pitch - his job is almost done. Though they do not yet fully understand, they are approaching a transition, from their past experience with Christ as their tutor and mentor, to a new phase, out in the world on their own.....though not completely. Jesus speaks of leaving the team, and of giving them the Holy Spirit in his place, to encourage and spur them on as they deal with the challenges ahead.

Jesus calls this promised gift 'Spirit of Truth' and 'Advocate'. The first links the Spirit with Jesus, who identifies himself as the Truth: "Believe in God," he had told his disciples, "believe also in me. I am the way, and the truth, and the life". Jesus came to reveal the truth, and the Spirit will continue that task - which includes, as John puts it, proving "the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement". We can only fully comprehend how to live and be in a right relationship with God through Christ's example. In following that example, our understanding shifts, from seeing God as a hard task-master over us, his subjects, to God as a loving Father and friend.

The Spirit is also described as an Advocate, making us think of helper, guide, someone on our side. But just as football players fall foul of the rules, so too do we at times forget to live by Christ's principles, and the Advocate can become our judge. So the Spirit may not always be a comfortable companion, but nevertheless is like a trusted friend who may need to give us some home truths, in order to jolt us from time to time out of our

complacency. And, like the apostles, we as believers have an obligation to testify, to live our lives in a way that bears witness to God's grace.

Having explored in John both Christ's promise to be with his disciples through the Spirit, and also the Spirit's purpose, let's move on now to Luke's account, in Acts, describing the fulfilment of that promise. We might first of all want to reflect on whether what we read in that account is what we might have expected. For the Holy Spirit does not appear as a dove, as it did at Christ's baptism. We don't have God's voice explaining what is happening, as was the case with Moses and the burning bush; or with Elijah who heard God in the silence that followed the wind and fire. In Acts, wind and fire accompany the Spirit, that then fills the apostles. But instead of hearing God's voice, we hear theirs, speaking on God's behalf of his deeds and power, in the languages of all the various nations represented in the gathered crowd.

The noise of the wind and the sight of the flames must have terrified those present. Luke describes how the Spirit arrives with such force that Peter compares it to Joel's prophecy about the violence of "the last days", when God's Spirit will be poured out with portents and signs, "blood, and fire and smokey mist". But Peter cannot mean that the disciples in that room were witnessing the last days. In citing Joel, Peter presents Pentecost, both as fulfilment of the prophecy - for the Spirit is indeed poured out on those gathered - and as a foretaste of those last days, when salvation will come to "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord". This episode in Acts depicts another threshold, looking to the past through the Old Testament, as it speaks both to the present and the future.

But, to quote the crowd: "What does this mean?". The Holy Spirit in Luke's account bestows ability; the apostles are empowered. This Advocate, promised in the reading from John, is shown to be a mobilising Spirit. Indeed, we are told later that three thousand of those watching this phenomenal event were baptised and received the Spirit. It is a Spirit that inspires witness, that motivates us. It is the Spirit of action as well as truth.

We have much to celebrate today. Although, Jesus no longer walks among us, the Holy Spirit is always with us, guiding and motivating. Pentecost reconnects us with Christ and reassures us of his constant presence. In a way, our very lives form a threshold, one that moves with us as we make memories and ponder the future. But important for us is the reassurance that past, present or future, we have with us at all times that gift of the Spirit. I

leave the poet Malcolm Guite to sum up what Pentecost means to us in the Church today through his sonnet called 'Our Mother Tongue is love'

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
In the name of Christ, amen.