



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Day Of Pentecost, Whit Sunday

Year A

Acts 2.1-21

John 20.19-23

As Christians when we hear the word 'Pentecost' we immediately think of the coming of the Holy Spirit to Christ's first followers. The city of Jerusalem was full because pilgrims had come for the Jewish festival as the law commanded. So I decided to look up the meaning of the Jewish Festival of Pentecost as an introduction to my Reflection for today.

Shavuot or in Greek Pentecost is hugely important to the Jews. We have a family bible passed down through the generations. It is a huge, beautifully made King James Version and it is illustrated with fantastic coloured prints. My favourite as a child was Daniel in the lion's den. There he sits in a beautiful crimson cloak with the folds falling to the floor as the ferocious lions gaze serenely at him. It is a picture of total calm showing the power of God. Mind you my one reservation was the horrid bones and skulls that littered the floor, they scared me stiff. My second favourite illustrated Exodus 23.16. It shows the Israelites bringing the first fruits to the Lord as he had commanded. Jewish males were required by law to gather in Jerusalem for Passover, Pentecost and the Festival of booths.

Pentecost was originally a harvest festival called 'The Festival of Harvest' in Exodus 23.16. Sheaves of the winter crop, barley, were brought to the Temple each day beginning at Passover until Shavuot the beginning of the harvest season fifty days later. This period is also known as Feast of Weeks because it lasts for seven weeks. It was all about giving thanks to God for his provision of harvest. At Shavuot the first fruits were gathered together and brought to the Temple, wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, or dates in procession with music and great rejoicing.

Shavuot, is also vitally important in that it commemorates the giving of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, it is really the most important event in Jewish history. This is where the emphasis moved to after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. So the festivals of Passover and Shavuot are inextricably linked, the Jews were led to freedom by God and given the Torah by him. We know the festival as Pentecost because it is the Greek word for fifty as it occurs fifty days after Passover.

Jesus commanded his followers in Luke chapter 24 and Acts 1 to return to Jerusalem and to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit

⁴⁹ 'And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' (Luke 24)

I think the description of what those first followers did after the ascension is beautiful,

¹² 'Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.' (Acts 1)

The central point is that they 'devoted themselves to prayer.' They had received Jesus' promise and as they waited they prayed continuously. They must have been excited as they waited too, just what form would the power take? But they knew the scriptures,

In Deuteronomy 4:10–13, Moses said to the people

"Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb (Sinai)... You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the Lord spoke... He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets."

When God gives the Torah there is smoke, fire and darkness, it is violent imagery, when Elijah meets God at Mount Horeb we are told,

¹¹ 'He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.' (1 Kings 19)

I just love that; God was not in the violence but in the sound of 'sheer silence,' or if you prefer it the 'still small voice of calm.' On the Mount of the Transfiguration the presence of God was indicated by the cloud. Just how would the power from on high appear? They must have been apprehensive but excited and totally trusting in Jesus. Without that power they could do little yet they had a great commission to fulfil throughout their lives.

The disciples have not been idle either since the ascension, they have elected another to fill the place of the traitor Judas and Matthias is chosen by lot. Lots were cast because they saw this as God choosing whom he wanted. Now they wait. Numerous times Jesus has promised not to leave them alone,

¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments ¹⁶ and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.' (John 14)

This is important in that Jesus speaks of the trinity, God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three persons in one God. Suddenly, there is the silence, God acts and the power from on high descends upon them. The Holy Spirit will be within them. It is important that it is at Pentecost the day the Jews gave thanks for God's giving the Torah.

¹ 'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.' (Acts 2)

Here we have the presence of the wind and fire, each one of them men and women receive the Holy Spirit. Each is transformed by the power of God dwelling within them, the power to strengthen, to enlighten and to embolden them. It is a Spirit that leads to action, to witness. The first thing is that they are given the ability to speak in other languages,

⁴ 'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.'

This doesn't necessarily refer to what we might call tongues because as we see those in Jerusalem recognise them speaking in their own language. As I have said the city would be packed to the rafters for the festival and here in Acts just some of those myriad pilgrims are mentioned.

⁵ 'Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'

Jesus' followers are all emboldened, enlightened, they are all out in the street teaching. Prior to this they could not have taught anything much, they simply had not really understood, now the scales are removed and they are able to witness. The fact that each person in the multitude hears them in their own language is another gift of the Spirit.

Of course there will always be those who scoff and they are present here saying that they are drunk. Peter sets them right straight away. Here he stands, the undoubted leader now. Here is Peter, the rock upon which Jesus promised the church would be built. No longer is he afraid, no longer does he deny his Lord, he is the first to teach and lead the others. He received his forgiveness by the risen Jesus at the lakeside. He received his commission, 'Feed my sheep,' that is exactly what he is committing his life to and he will continue to witness until he dies a martyr's death as Jesus has said he would. So now he addresses them,

¹⁴ '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. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.'

What you are witnessing is nothing short of the action of God working within us, what is more the scriptures have pointed to this,

¹⁶ 'No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ "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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,

in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy...

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The poem is beautiful in its own right, let's just pause and look at it for a minute. This is the promise of God that he will pour his Spirit in all flesh. All notice, men and women, slaves and free, God's promise is for all people it is completely inclusive, no one is better than another. With God there is no such thing as status or anything else, all are one in the sight of God, and all are equally loved by him. All are redeemed and all will share in his promise of eternal life. The Spirit of God enters all believers. Thus the disciples are speaking out in the power of the Spirit,

²¹ 'Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Remember what festival this is; look back to that quotation from Deuteronomy 4: See how the quotation Peter gives from Joel is similar in its imagery to when God gave the commandments, the crowd would have recognised the similarities,

¹⁹ 'And I will show portents in the heaven above

and signs on the earth below,

blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness

and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.'

Peter is talking about Jesus' second coming. Jesus has promised he will return again in God's time to judge the earth. This will be in God's newly created order which really began with Christ's resurrection. To receive these benefits you must turn to Christ, become his follower, trust in his promises and commit your lives to him. There are no half and halves here. First Peter tells them outright of their sin in handing Jesus over to be crucified then he demands repentance.

³² 'This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear... ³⁶ Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.'

We might expect them to turn on Peter and the apostles but no such thing,

³⁷ 'Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' ³⁸ Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

Peter promises the gift of the Spirit. At baptism we call down the Holy Spirit and the candidate receives the Spirit of God. God's Spirit is with us always and we can turn to God in prayer and as Jesus promises, 'I will not leave you comfortless.' That is as true for us as it was those first disciples.

Our gospel reading is one of the most famous in the whole of the Gospels and of course the link is the Holy Spirit. It begins; 'When it was evening on that day'. The disciples have shut the doors on that first Easter and no doubt after they ran away from Jesus at his arrest, "for fear of the Jews." They have seen what an angry mob can do and Jerusalem is crowded with the very people who had cried out for their master's blood. Their lives had been ruined, their hopes dashed. Peter himself was still smarting from the denial, they were broken men. That night their minds must have been in turmoil, partially because Mary and 'the women' had reported that Jesus had risen. Of course,

looking at the readings as we have with Acts first, the contrast between the apostles is amazing. On that Friday their world fell apart as they watched Jesus die but now the empty tomb gapes wide and Mary's words 'I have seen the Lord,' ring in their ears. What did it all mean? Had some of his earlier teaching begun to come back to them now? We can imagine their confusion and sorrow but also hope.

What happens next is wonderful, suddenly Jesus is with them. The word 'the doors were locked' has a double purpose, yes it is to keep out the Jews but no one can get through a locked door. Jesus does however, he is suddenly there. He is there in reality, he is no ghost. That is important. This is the resurrected Lord. This is a real physical body and yet it is different too.

The first thing he says is so significant, "Peace be with you." It is in part 'shalom,' the traditional Jewish greeting. Actually the word shalom has a deep meaning in itself, it means to wish someone wholeness, wholeness of body, mind and spirit exactly what the disciples need just now. But Jesus, by his words of peace, does not just wish it, he achieves it for the disciples. His words give the deep peace of Christ. It is the power of God and it calmed their fears and restored them. Just as his 'peace' had stilled the waters of the Sea of Galilee, so now it stills the tumult within each one of them. This is echoed by the words of the peace in our own Easter service

Notice the next thing that he does,

²⁰ 'After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.' The point is that he shows them the physical marks of the crucifixion. He is literally saying, 'I am he; I am no spirit I am your Lord.' There is no more doubt, 'Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.' Again we have the repeated 'Peace be with you.' He must still them totally and take away any fear. What follows is his commission. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

The words about sin mean I think that they take the love of Jesus and it is through belief in him that sins are forgiven. The most important thing here is that Jesus breathes on them. References to the breath of life are numerous and so important in the bible. This is from Ezekiel 37,

⁹ 'Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'

Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Such a short sentence but such a huge thing has happened. It is really; 'breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' The disciples have received the Holy Spirit. Think of their task, a few poor men sent out to bring the good news to all people, sent out to continue the work Jesus began. Could the broken and cowering men from a few minutes ago have achieved anything? Of course not but as with Mary Magdalene as she hears the Lord speak her name at the entrance of the tomb, in an instant their world is transformed, they are transformed. They are strong with Jesus' strength. It is because the Holy Spirit is within them that they will fling open the locked doors and proclaim the risen Lord. For the moment they are still confused as to how they must fulfil this commission. Later Peter says, 'I am going fishing!' Showing he still is confused as to how he should go about the Lord's will, God's will. Jesus' promise will be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends on them in tongues of fire and with the power of the rushing mighty wind. It is then that the promise is complete; it is then that they are transformed and can go out in his name commissioned by him and with a new understanding.

If we think of our lives we will probably recognise times when we have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, maybe to strengthen or to heal. Certainly I have, I remember vividly the sudden heat that came over everyone once at the laying on of hands. I was only about twenty then and had no idea what I had experienced until we were all told. The whole experience was very humbling. Jesus promised the gift of the Spirit to all his followers and so we say with confidence,

'The Lord is here, his Spirit is with us.'

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