



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Pentecost Sunday Year C 2022

Acts 2.1-21

John 14.8-17 [25-27]

'When the day of Pentecost had come,' must be one of the most famous lines in the New Testament. Pentecost is certainly a huge turning point for those early followers of Jesus. Think back to how it had been, even after Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the evenings after the resurrection they are still at a loss as to how to carry out their commission. Peter's phrase, 'I'm going fishing,' just about sums up their state of mind. Of course, there on the lake shore, they meet with the risen Lord who eats with them and reclaims Peter after his sad failure in the courtyard. Jesus forgave Peter at the time, recognising human weakness. It is doubtful that Peter had forgiven himself so the three times repeated, 'Do you love me?' restores him. The commission to action, 'Feed my sheep,' gave him a purpose. Jesus had been with the disciples and had appeared to his followers after his resurrection. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians,

'For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, <sup>4</sup>and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles' (1 Corinthians 15).

We celebrated Ascension Day on Thursday. At his return to his Father Jesus gives a further commission (Matthew 28.19)

<sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

So they have their commission, they have been told by Jesus to wait together for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>8</sup> 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1)

Firstly however they need to replace the traitor Judas. The chosen replacement must be a follower of Jesus from the time of his baptism by John and all through his ministry. There is consultation and eventually two men, Barnabas and Matthias are selected. The final decision is by lot and Matthias is chosen. The apostles are now at full strength again and we are told there are about one hundred and fifty close followers. We cannot know for sure who was in that room on that day but just after the Ascension we are told that,

<sup>12</sup> 'Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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)

These would have been joined by Matthias certainly. The Jewish feast of Pentecost fell fifty days after the feast of Passover and as with Passover every male Jew within twenty miles of Jerusalem was required to attend. Of course many more would make the journey, so the city would be crowded with people. This explains the mention of crowds from all sorts of places

<sup>9</sup> 'Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs.' (Acts 2)

Pentecost was what we might call harvest festival, it was also known as the 'Feast of Weeks.' Pentecost marked the gathering of harvest and so two barley loaves were offered in gratitude to God. It was also a day of rest. At Pentecost a farmer would bring the first sheaf of his harvest as an offering to God. It was indeed an offering of the first fruits in that sense, however it was more than that. Fifty days after Passover, at Pentecost, Moses had given God's rule of life, his Ten Commandments to the Israelites. Therefore to the Jews Passover and Pentecost were inextricably linked by the Exodus. To Christians of course they are inextricably linked too. It was at Passover that Jesus was killed and then rose to new life on the first day of the new week. It was at Pentecost that he sent the Holy Spirit.

The sending of the Holy Spirit is linked absolutely to Jesus' return to his Father at the ascension. He is lifted up to heaven and the power will come from on high, the power of God sent by Jesus the Christ.

The other thing that Luke stresses immediately is that, 'they were all together in one place.' Here are the believers in community – not just the disciples but the closest followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon them all – think back to the reading we looked at some weeks ago concerning Cornelius, his family and friends. Peter and the Jewish converts with him saw the Spirit come upon them all. For that reason nothing could hinder their baptism. Community, not individualism is stressed again and again.

This is a momentous occurrence; it is something new. The Spirit is described specifically in terms of the sound of a 'mighty wind' which filled the house, then tongues as of fire rested on each one of them. It reminded me of 1 Kings 19.11 and Elijah's encounter with God in the cave.

'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; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.'

It is then that he hears God's voice.

The Holy Spirit came in the rushing mighty wind and tongues of flame at that Pentecost. But we need to remember that God's Holy Spirit comes in many ways. Sometimes it is in the 'still small voice of calm' that we experience the Holy Spirit and the strength of God's love in our hearts and minds. Think back to the gospel passage; to those disciples, just ordinary men, who were puzzled by Jesus' words, who were saddened and yes frightened at what he was saying about leaving them. Think of how they ran away at the arrest and only Peter followed, only to fall at the first hurdle. However, only Judas was lost. They came together again in that room with the other followers. They had lived through Jesus' resurrection appearances. They had seen the ascension, now they waited. It is at this moment, with the coming of the 'power from on high' that they are to experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. If you think about the passages we have already looked at from Acts that transformation is so clear. One example is Peter and John before Annas and Caiaphas,

<sup>13</sup> 'Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.' (Acts 4)

The point is that these 'ordinary men' uneducated as they were have been completely changed.

They speak with boldness yes – but also with the wisdom and understanding the Holy Spirit has given them. The teaching of Jesus, so cloudy at the time, will suddenly become crystal clear. They will also have the ability to impart that teaching. Remember the reading from two weeks ago,

<sup>25</sup> 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.' (John 14)

The first signs of this we see here in our passage for today, they speak in other languages. They are speaking in other tongues, not of their own volition but 'as the Spirit gave them utterance.' There are a few points to stress here. Certainly one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the ability to speak in tongues. Some people can do so others cannot; it is one example of God's gifts from the Spirit. The Holy Spirit manifests itself in many ways.

These followers, previously frightened and confused men and women are transformed now. Firstly they are strengthened; they are emboldened to go out; but most importantly they have the power and authorisation of God. Of their own power they can do nothing. They are empowered and speak and act in the name of Jesus Christ. There are many, many people in Jerusalem and a great crowd gathers as the disciples speak. Here we are told the disciples speak in tongues and the people in the crowd recognise their own languages. The people in the crowd can understand what the disciples are saying. It is an important point that people from all nationalities can understand them. That signifies the fact that the word of God is for all people, it is universal. All are invited to the 'wedding banquet' of God. Of course most of the people who are in Jerusalem for Pentecost would be converts to Judaism because they had come to celebrate the Feast, however the point still holds true. The good news of God is for the entire world.

Peter, once again the leader, speaks boldly to the crowd, dismissing the scoffing of a few he gets straight to witness. He quotes from Joel 2. 28-32. He does not speak of Jesus at first. That seems strange. The point is that he is recounting signs of the last days when the new age of God would come to fruition. All through Jewish history the faithful have waited for the time when God's anointed, the chosen one, the Messiah of the line of the great King David would come to save his

chosen people. The Messiah would rule not just Israel but the whole world and would usher in God's new creation!

Well, says Peter, now that time has come and it has come in Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. After our passage finishes Peter continues by teaching the crowd about Jesus. He goes straight to the heart of the matter, to the crucifixion and resurrection.

<sup>22</sup> 'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— <sup>23</sup>this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.' (Acts 2) Peter begins the mission on the day of Pentecost which is their commission forever, as it is every Christian's.

<sup>36</sup> 'Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.' <sup>37</sup> 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?' <sup>38</sup>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.'

He tells the crowd that they need to, 'Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.' Peter makes it clear that the good news is for all humanity, anyone can turn to Jesus, there are no bars to being a Christian, all are welcome.

Luke completes this account by telling the reader that three thousand became 'followers of the way' that day. The first apostles do what Jesus commanded, they 'break bread and devote themselves to prayer.'

The story of Pentecost is wonderful in itself but it is wonderful for us now too and for every Christian down the ages. I always say at a baptism that the same Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan is present in that service. It always fills me with awe. We know that at certain times the Holy Spirit is called down, at a confirmation or ordination. Indeed at the Holy Communion the priest says words such as 'send your Holy Spirit that broken bread and wine outpoured may be for us the body and blood of your dear Son.'

But we also know that our God is a God of community, three in one in a community of love. God's Holy Spirit is with us now. Whether we feel the rushing mighty wind or the still small voice we trust God is near to us at all times. We say in our creed 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.' God's Holy Spirit is a life giving force. God is with us, we are not alone ever.

Our gospel reading takes us once more to Jesus' 'farewell discourse,' last week we looked at part of the great prayer which concludes it. The disciples in the upper room after the Last Supper are listening to Jesus. His words must certainly have been confusing them. It is only after the death and resurrection of Jesus and specifically with the coming of the Holy Spirit that things become clearer. Thomas has just asked a question in response to Jesus' statement that he is leaving them but that he is going to prepare a place for them. It is the famous passage so often read at funeral services. These are words of comfort. He follows this with the statement that they 'know where' he is going. They are all confused and Thomas speaks for them.

'Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'

<sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

That is a huge statement. But literally Jesus is saying he is in the Father so of course we come to the Father through him. Now it is Philip who has a demand, but it allows Jesus to expand this further.

<sup>8</sup> 'Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'

We can almost hear Jesus sigh at this point. These men have been with him for three years, for three years they have been taught by him, asked questions of him, listened to Jesus' teaching the people and yet!! They still don't get it, they still do not really know who their master and Lord is.

<sup>9</sup> 'Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?'

Jesus spells it out once more, quietly and clearly in this dimly lit room. And if we want a clear description of the community within the Godhead this is it.

'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?'

Jesus is the Christ; he is the second person of the trinity. Jesus is God incarnate; he is walking with humanity on earth to carry out God's plan and his commission. Think of Peter's words in the passage from Acts,

<sup>23</sup> 'this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God,'

He will walk the path to Calvary very soon. He will die in love for humanity but the fight he wins there will conquer sin forever, just as at his rising he conquers death. Salvation is through Jesus Christ. He is in the Father and the Father in him. He was in the beginning the co-creator of all that is. It is always worth going back to re-read the opening passage of John's gospel and then come back to look at who Jesus is in the light of that. It is not just who Jesus is, his life and death show the nature of God, the God who is love. The Hebrew Scriptures have foretold this. Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophet's words and teachings. The way to God is Jesus Christ. There is nothing exclusive in this; Jesus came into the world for all humanity. He died in love for all humanity.

'The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.'

Jesus and his Father are one; look at Jesus' actions if you want to see the nature of God. Jesus has just knelt and washed their feet, including his betrayer's. Love and forgiveness are ours if we turn to Christ. Jesus makes a prophecy to these men now,

<sup>12</sup> 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

They must have been thinking back now to the works, the signs they have seen Jesus perform throughout his ministry. They must have been silently asking themselves how on earth can this be? Well there is one answer to that, the power from on high will come upon them and they, and all who are empowered by the Holy Spirit, will be transformed. They will not act in their own strength but in the strength from God. Indeed says Jesus, this cannot happen unless I leave you but when I do I will send God's Holy Spirit to you.

<sup>15</sup> 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. <sup>17</sup> 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.'

Once again Jesus uses the word 'world', he uses it in the sense of those who will not follow him but follow their own ways or worse still the ways of evil.

<sup>10</sup> 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.' (John 1)  
Jesus came to the world of which he was co-creator, the world he loved and died for yet those who turn away do so of their own volition, those who turn to him receive the full promises of God. I have quoted this previously but do so again because it is so central,

<sup>25</sup> 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.'

They will be transformed in every way including and especially intellect and understanding of the nature of Jesus and his teaching. Go back to the passage from Acts and look at Peter's explanation which follows it and then compare that to the confused and mystified disciples at the Last Supper. There are so many examples of this in Luke's account, in Acts for example, Peter's restoration of Dorcas to life! He acts in Jesus' name; nothing can be achieved except through the power of God. What follows now is Jesus giving them the peace of God,

<sup>27</sup> 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'

These are wonderful words, but in the light of what is to happen soon they are so important. This is not just the normal, 'Shalom,' though that has its deep meaning. This is the peace that only God can give. People run after all kinds of solace in so many ways, so many of which are at best shallow and at worst destructive. No, the world cannot give true peace of mind and spirit, only God's peace does that. Jesus gives it in love now to the disciples to strengthen them for what is to come. But his promises are for us just as surely. 'Whatever you ask' is a wonderful reference to prayer. We have a deep, close relationship of love with God, the God who walks alongside us in the form of his Holy Spirit.

We need to listen to Jesus' words of peace; we need to hear him say to each one of us, 'Do not be afraid.' Wherever we are, whatever we are doing we know we are surrounded by the love of God. Just as surely he says to us, 'if you love me you will keep my commandments.' A real relationship is two way, we receive so much but we must walk in his way, live out his teaching, love one another as he loved us. When we feel we can't, we are assured that what we do, we do with the help of God. We are never alone.

*'Be still, for the presence of the Lord the Holy one is here.'* David J Evans.

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