

Bishop Karen Sermon

Pentecost

The gift of the Spirit which is distinctive of the Feast of Pentecost has been prepared by the Feast of the Ascension. Just as the prophet Elijah, who was concerned with those outside Israel, also ascended into heaven passed on his spirit to his disciple Elisha, so the prophet Jesus, who was concerned with those outside Israel, as he ascended into heaven, passed on his Spirit to his disciples.

For these last ten days we have been praying with others throughout the country as part of the Thy Kingdom Come prayer initiative. Praying that people who do not yet know the love of Christ will come to know it, praying for God's blessing to come upon those people and places who need to sense something of the goodness of God, and particularly at this time of pandemic praying for healing for the sick, comfort for the bereaved and those who are working so hard to end the spread of the virus.

Today, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those early followers of Jesus and, as a result, celebrating the birth of the church.

We often think of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, the Consoler, the bearer of light and peace. Or perhaps we think of the Holy Spirit in terms of a guide, or a director who we can summon to help us do or be what God expects of us. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is all of these, but much more, too. Psalm 104 speaks of the breath or "spirit" of God as being the source of all life. Hence the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is seen as the source of the life of the Church.

As our own world has become decidedly smaller over the last few months and as we live with the uncertainty of what the future may look like, trying to work out new parameters, or whether past plans will ever become a reality, Pentecost reveals to us once again all is possible.

Like the mighty wind which we sometimes experience, the Spirit of God can also be a disturbing force. The Holy Spirit may well move us to do something we are afraid to do. The Holy Spirit may even move us to do something we initially do not want to do, unsettling us, shaking us loose from our safe places; the Holy Spirit pushes us out from the familiar into the unknown.

This is the kind of powerful force that I imagine filling the room where the disciples were hiding on that first Pentecost. There they were. All huddled together, hiding for fear of what the Jews would do to them. Suddenly, a noise like a "strong driving wind" blows into the room and tongues of fire appear and leap on them.

But then what happened? After they had received the Holy Spirit, those frightened, discouraged people; the people who had deserted Jesus in his time of trial; the one who had denied him – these people came out of their huddle of fear and began to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. That was a day of change for everyone in that room as they began to use the gifts given to them by God.

Fire can be frightening; even the tiniest flame can prove unpredictable and intense; leaping and dancing, crackling and roaring, or smouldering unseen. For early humankind the harnessing of fire may have been the most obvious indication of our supremacy over other species. Harnessing its power, and especially discovering how to kindle it for ourselves, may have seemed to give almost godlike status to humanity.

Nevertheless, whilst fire was prized for supplying heat and light, as a means of cooking food and later for generating energy to drive machines, it was still obvious that it was dangerous and tricky, to be something treated with enormous respect. However human beings tried to domesticate it, there was still a chance that it could escape our control and quite literally backfire on us.

If we stop to think about it, the idea that the Holy Spirit first appeared like fire, irradiating the disciples is quite unnerving. For, in a secret, enclosed location in Jerusalem, two of the most fickle and elusive elements known come together: fire and a strong wind. Unreasonable flame, and invisible, erratic currents of air. Materialising from nowhere, they rush over the apostles like waves... and something extraordinary happens to them: they can suddenly do things which they never could before.

So startling is their transformation that bystanders seek an explanation for in human terms this simply isn't possible. One minute these men are a demoralised remnant, the next they are leaders and preachers, visionaries and martyrs; before they are a ragbag of labourers and after they are the "A" team, skilled in communicating the gospel across the culture and language divide. For the average Pamphylia or Egyptian, finding the man who had to wave his hands to make himself understood at your market stall yesterday, suddenly fluent and persuasive in your mother tongue is odd to say the least! Something is out of control, behaving as it ought not to.

Some years ago, there was a British Gas advertising campaign, where various celebrities would snap their fingers and a blue flame would spring up at the end of their thumb: "Don't you just love being in control?" was the slogan. It was seductive. Of course, we love being in control: air conditioning, central heating, 24-hour supermarkets, on tap TV, flexitime... we want to choose, to please ourselves in as many ways as possible.

In the prevailing Western culture, the will of the individual is supreme, so God is becoming confined to smaller and smaller boxes, domesticated, crammed into a shape and size that seeks to place him at our disposal.

Yet Pentecost reminds us of the power of God and that the opposite is true. In the Celtic tradition, the Holy Spirit is represented as the wild goose! A bird which is uncontrollable, something uncontained and untamed. Their song is raucous and loud, yet passionate in devotion to the flock, commanding, strange and unexpected, unpredictable yet also compelling.

One of the things I enjoy is to walk along the seashore and marvel at the perfectly shaped, smooth shiny pebbles as the wave gently lap upon them. It is wonderful imagining a smashed piece of rock being honed by the waves as the wind causes them to pound away. Instead of creating something awful or imperfect or colourless, the power of the wind creates something beautiful and admirable and special. The power of fire does the same, if used in the right way. A huge chunk of metal can be melted down and moulded by flame into something beautiful, valuable and lasting.

So it is with us and the Spirit. A vehicle of holiness God, through his Spirit, works in our lives shaping us and making us – beautiful, valuable, attractive, admirable and above all special. At Pentecost the Church becomes a "holy" reality. We become people being made 'holy'.

It would be easy to think of this account of the first Pentecost as just an intriguing story having little or nothing to do with us today. But I firmly believe that if Pentecost doesn't shake us up, we've missed the whole point of the Pentecost experience. Each of us who is baptized has received the Holy Spirit, probably not in the dramatic way the early disciples did, but we have received that very same Spirit that they did and this great feast of the Church's birthday calls each one of us into a new way of being and

believing, a new way of living and loving. It calls us out of our little comfort zones to participate in spreading the Good News and building God's kingdom.

Think back to what happened in the Gospel. Jesus walked through the locked door where the disciples were hiding and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Now these folks didn't respond by having a party to celebrate receiving the Holy Spirit and then home. They didn't respond by "taking a little time" to think about it, or to wonder if they could do what Jesus was asking of them.

Were they afraid? Were they anxious? Were they unsure of themselves? Probably, but they were willing to open themselves to be empowered by the Spirit and responded to Jesus sending them forth to continue his earthly ministry, using the gifts that God had given them.

So, what are we waiting for? God has poured out gifts upon us that we might love and serve the Lord and our neighbour in the way God has intended especially for us.

The tiniest chink of openness to the Spirit can enable us to do things we never believed we could, help us weather storms of great devastation, uphold us in the deepest sorrow... This is why the Church is here, to proclaim who is really in control and to participate in God's mission. Each with our various complementary gifts, we are the ones who can, together, make God known and his kingdom come.

Today is an opportunity to think about our own lives in relation to God's resources – his wind, his fire and his gifts. If we need God's help let us ask him for it. If we feel we need to have our sharp edges knocked off and to be gently honed into holy shape, let's ask him for that too. If we feel powerless and sense we need to be bolder in our work for God let's come before him also today to ask for help with that.

The Risen Lord longs for the fire of his Spirit to daily enflame our hearts. Then the small sparks will turn into a roaring fire of God's love, transforming the face of the earth.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love.