

## **Sermon, Pentecost**

### St Bartholomew's Burnley 2025

I. Pentecost represents the beginning of the church's life. It's grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus, in his death and resurrection, but it represents the next stage in God's self-revelation, God's self-giving love. The life of the church doesn't really begin until the coming of the Holy Spirit.

II. In our second reading from Acts, the descent of the Spirit happens at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost which is literally the 50th day after Passover. Originally a harvest festival, Pentecost had become a celebration of the giving of the law to Moses for God's people, Israel.

And now here in Acts, Luke presents the gift of the Spirit for the community of God's people, the church — a community that's in solidarity with Israel and Moses and the gift of the law.

And look at who's present: Yes, there are the Twelve Apostles, as we'd expect, and there are members of Jesus' own family. But there's also a group of women present, the Galilean women who've followed Jesus all through his ministry and have been there at the cross, the burial & the empty tomb. Prominent among these is Mary, the mother of Jesus, the first Christian in Luke's Gospel. And other women too: Mary Magdalene, leader of the Galilean women disciples, and Joanna and Susanna, and many other women disciples.

And all of them, despite their differences, are united in prayer as they wait together in joy and hope on God and God's promise. Indeed in Luke's writings, in both the Gospel and Acts, the Spirit is linked in the closest possible way to prayer. All the most important events in Luke-Acts occur in the context of prayer, including Pentecost.

Luke's story of Pentecost is full of drama and symbolism: wind, fire, speaking in tongues, all signs of the Holy Spirit's descent. The wind is associated with creation in the OT: the Spirit of God hovering over the darkness as the word of God speaks life into being at the beginning of Genesis. Wind is also linked to the creation of Adam where God breathes life into his nostrils. So wind, breath, spirit all are closely connected & point to the life-giving power of God to create life, to sustain life, to enable life to thrive.

The symbol of fire also signifies the awesome presence and power of God. Moses first encounters God at the burning bush; and the pillar of fire guides God's people through the wilderness at night, in all their trials & struggles & dangers. Fire represents the divine warmth & comfort, as well as guidance. So the Spirit, Luke tells us, becomes the Church's fire: to reassure, to comfort, to guide.

Speaking in tongues is equally important for Luke. This is not the form of ecstatic speech that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians (which arises from mystical experience). But rather it's the capacity of the apostolic community — both women and men — to communicate to all the people who are present for the Feast of Pentecost in their own native languages. What they're hearing is the message of salvation in their mother tongue.

And in that sense, Pentecost for Luke represents the reversal of Babel. In our first Old Testament reading, the people of Babylon gather together to build a tower that will be a symbol of their might and power and strength, a symbol of empire to challenge God's own authority. And so God, so the story goes, creates different languages, precisely to disrupt this act of dominance and pride, and rebellion against God. The result is the dispersion, the separation of people from one another.

What Pentecost does is to bring people together: not under a single language but in the ability of the church to speak to people in their own languages and culture: to draw people in to a community of unity in diversity. And that ability is a divine one, coming directly from the Spirit who gathers us all into one, in all our differences.

So that there's a profound sense of unity at Pentecost in this gift of tongues: the disciples have been given the gift of proclaiming God's good news, God's word of reconciliation in intimate language, the language closest to the heart. It's a symbol of the overcoming of the barriers that divide and separate and alienate.

III. In our Gospel reading, John gives us another perspective on the Holy Spirit. In his Farewell Discourse, Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the 'Paraclete', an old-fashioned word that means a lot of things: advocate, comforter, guide, helper, companion, teacher. With Jesus' departure, the Paraclete offers us the same consolation & guidance that Jesus has given us. Indeed, the Paraclete IS the presence of Jesus within and among us after his departure.

And John assures us that the Spirit will lead us, will lead the church, will lead our community, into ever-deeper understandings of truth: the truth about what the world is like and the truth about who God is, revealed above all in Jesus. And with the Spirit-Paraclete comes the assurance that all that is hostile to God and to goodness and life and love, is already overcome.

For John we are already looking at the end of sin and death, the victory of peace over violence and truth over the great lies of our culture. In the life of the church, that ultimate reality is already becoming realised: we are called to live out the life gained through Jesus' death and resurrection in acts of love and justice. And we await its final consummation, in and through the presence of the Paraclete.

V. In the light of Pentecost our calling as the Church, as a parish, as Christians is to receive the breath of God renewing us, to open ourselves to God's comfort & guidance and to become therefore the witnesses of God's love for the world and indeed for the whole creation.

Today's feast reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the one who makes our life and our mission possible, strengthening us, consoling us, guiding us, always in & through our prayer together. We're sent into a suffering world with the Spirit as our companion: with the winds of hope beneath our feet, the fire of love burning in our hearts, and the capacity to speak Christ's reconciling, life-giving word across all barriers and all divisions.

Thanks be to God.

*Mthr Dorothy Lee*