

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 24th May 2026

(Pentecost Sunday)

A number of years ago during a visit to Washington in the United States I found myself alone on a Sunday morning, it was the 24th October, and trying to decide whether I would go to Church or not. As I exited the Holiday Inn at around 10.30 am. I found I had two choices about Church. If I went to the right, I would have come across the Episcopal Church that the President of the United States attends for official occasions and occasionally at other times. If I turned to the left, there was St Luke's Episcopal Church. As it was St Luke's day, I chose the left. {just in case you thought I made the decision based on politics} What I did not know was that this was an Afro American Church and of course they were celebrating their patronal feast day. On this particular occasion the church was full probably 300 in attendance, but I was one of only a handful of non-Afro Americans.

It was one of my first experiences of worship in an Episcopal church and I was struck first by the how the service from the Book of Common Prayer sounded in the American voice. On this occasion the Presider was an Afro American woman and among the incense and procession as she entered the church, I was immediately reminded of my teenage years at St Bartholomew's Burnley where I grew up. The Choir on this day could be heard enthusiastically and energetically singing Gospel music. Throughout the service there was a powerful presence of the Holy Spirit evident in the way the congregation participated with enthusiasm and the setting for the Eucharist was lively, engaging, a congregational setting and awe inspiring. This was a wealthy congregation and the preacher reminded them on this occasion from where they had come from and that their mission today was to pass on the faith to

others. This was one of the most enriching worship experiences of my life. Never had I experienced the sharing of peace with such emotion and pleasure. {Pre Covid of course}

Likewise, in South Africa, in a town outside Johannesburg a few years later. On this occasion a small congregation of just over 200 by African standards welcomed me with warmth and laughter. Again, the Book of Common prayer set to Gospel music along with traditional Anglican Chant was awe inspiring and exciting. Despite the poverty and deprivation of this town I was overcome by their hospitality and passion for the faith. The Spirit of God could be seen as central to lives in spite of great deprivation.

Anglicans in our own Diocese from the Sudan share their faith and worship in a similar way and in a strong catholic style. What strikes me most about the Sudanese is their joy and spontaneity in their willingness to express their faith publicly. I experienced this when attending a funeral of one of their clergy when without any prompting, singing and dancing for their departed brother was performed in their belief that he was now with God and raised in Glory.

Anglicans here at home are at times more solemn, reserved, subdued, private and our tradition values choirs and fine music, although watching Songs of Praise last Sunday showed a livelier side of traditional Anglicanism.

Here we gather today, on this feast of Pentecost, as the faithful worshipping Anglicans of this parish to proclaim the great Christian noble vision of God's generosity and justice. A parish small in numbers but highly committed and engaged in the community and their faith experiences.

The setting for Today's Gospel from John is the familiar upper room. John presents the resurrection of Jesus, the giving of the spirit and the commissioning of the disciples all at once. The emphases in the passage we read today is threefold. The first is peace. The second is forgiveness. Peace was bequeathed to the disciples after the Last Supper and forgiveness was always known as God's mercy and justice. The third, the call to mission is the substance of today's Gospel. We are to be peaceful, resourceful, God Spirit filled people with the responsibility to be people of forgiveness and hope following in the ministry and footsteps of Jesus himself. As I said last Sunday, Central to our mission is reconciliation with all people and as we gather today, we recall that our own nation still has failed to address the issues that confront the first nation people of this land. The need is to do more than say sorry. Sadly it seems that we are also struggling to be a nation at ease with itself, struggling politically for a vision that creates social cohesion and shares justice for all. Political bickering, point scoring, denial of our common humanity and the blame game. In our own communion we are divided in many places and lack respect for our diversity.

The feast of Pentecost celebrates the birth of the Church, the coming among us of God's Holy Spirit, the enabler, the facilitator, the encourager, and motivator upon each and every one of us, not as individuals alone, but as individuals in community. Pentecost has its roots in the Jewish Festival of Shavuot. In biblical times, the festival of Shavuot was seen as the celebration time for the successful spring wheat and barley harvests.

In a sermon he preached many years ago in his Cathedral Church in Cape Town, Archbishop Desmond Tutu began with these words: "in the beginning God-in the end God." I recalled

these words as I re read the creation stories as told in the book of Genesis.

“In the beginning when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the power of God was moving over the water. Then God commanded, ‘let there be light’. From these first words of Genesis, God is identified as the source, the power, and the spirit behind the creation of all that exists now and to come. He is the giver of life, the gift bearer.

This spirit, power or the Paraclete as John in his Gospel refers to, is of the very life, order, essence, substance, personality, and makeup of God. It reflects God’s integrity and generosity. Jesuit priest Alfred Delp who died at the hands of Hitler in 1945, speaks about the Holy Spirit as God’s passion for himself. This indwelling presence of God must take possession of our senses, draw us out of ourselves and focus on being the people God calls us to be, people of grace and hospitality for all.

Pentecost celebrates the holy fire of God’s passion, the spirit of God that seeks to “aflame and set alight”, men and women to build community, share gifts and talents and embrace the ongoing revelation of God in the world.

Are you a dreamer? I am. I dream for an invigorated and passionate church and Christian message for our time. I dream for a bunch of creative and passionate clergy trained with fire in their belly. Likewise laity with fire shooting from their bodies. I hope for an engaged and well-informed laity who can respond not just with biblical texts and cliches but deep theological reflection on the challenges and changes taking place in our times. I have no doubt that, as in the creation story, God’s spirit is still moving over his creation. Like Desmond Tutu, the life and resurrection of Jesus tells me that we are in the between times. There is no absence of the spirit,

only our inability to find it, to listen to it. Rather in our silence we avoid it and ignore it.

God's Holy Spirit is not something just for our own personal experience, but rather for the whole of creation. Pentecost puts the end to fear. Pentecost challenges the church where it is arrogant, high and mighty, self-centered and where doors are closed. The spirit of Pentecost is like a rushing wind pushing, shoving and cajoling us into the byways and highways of modern life to shout out the good news in word and deed. We thrive as a community when we work together, not divided, fractured or broken but rather filled with the spirit, as God with us.

May this Pentecost time be a reminder of the passion of God for the whole of creation and a call to us to take up the baton of his deep passion and love for us all to pass onto others?
Amen