

Sermon 5th June 2022 - Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-21, John 14: 8-17

What a weekend this is: Not only is it the Queen's Platinum Jubilee but it's one when we have also been sharing our 150th celebrations with the local community with the street party. And now it's Pentecost, that moment when we mark the very first formation of Christ's Church on earth, when the followers of Christ received the Holy Spirit - Now God dwells in us and we in God.

When we consider the familiar reading from Acts, what is it that hits us about Pentecost? Is it the extraordinary event and sound of the wind, the tongues of fire touching the believers? Is it the speaking in tongues or the empowerment of Peter to address the crowd?

Well, the thing that really hit me as I prepared the talk was verse 13. ***Some, however, made fun of them and said 'They have had too much wine'.***

The story of Pentecost is intrinsically about the empowerment and purpose of the Church within the context of the wider world. It is not about us indulgently basking in the Glory of Christ, but about us being 'In Christ' to the world.

From the very outset at Pentecost, the Spirit-filled Church attracted attention from the non-believers around it. All sorts of people from all walks of life and backgrounds ***were amazed and perplexed and asked one another What does this mean*** and of course ***Some, however made fun of them and said 'They have had too much wine'.***

In a sense the Church had become Spiritual Marmite, you were going to love it or hate it, but what you couldn't do was avoid its taste.

By the Spirit, Peter was transformed into a powerful speaker, proclaiming Christ, unafraid to confront the very people who had called for the crucifixion of Christ, offering forgiveness through repentance. ...and three thousand were baptised on that day. This is pithy stuff.

And from the end of Chapter 2, which was not part of our reading today, we have that glorious - and frankly rather challenging - description of the early Church, the fellowship of believers:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts, they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

And this made me stop and think about what our neighbours see in us as a church in this our 150th year. Do they see an authenticity and sincerity of faith that has a touch of Spiritual Marmite about us? Are they asking, What does it mean or accusing us of being on something? When we have our flower and model festival or the community activity weekend, what will they see and feel about us?

Now this is not an invite to start beating ourselves up by over-concentrating on our inadequacies or revelling in our perceived strengths. But at Pentecost it's a fair question to ask ourselves what a Spirit-Filled Church might look like to the wider community as well as ourselves as the fellowship of believers.

To answer this, we obviously need to have a fundamental understanding of what, or more appropriately 'who' the Holy Spirit is.

This is important because attitudes and understandings of the Holy Spirit can be very divisive in God's Church, courtesy of the Devil. There can be an attitude of superiority over experience of the Holy Spirit. Some would argue that unless you speak in tongues or are Baptised in the Spirit, or witnessed and prayed miracles of healing, or have words of knowledge - that you are not really Spirit-filled. For many this can create a fear or distrust of the Spirit, as one appears to be losing self-control or rationale thought.

There is ample room for different experiences of the Holy Spirit within the church, but one thing is clear – it can only work for good and never for bad; it can never be coercive.

So, what do we understand by the Holy Spirit? Well, there's no better place to start than in the Nicene Creed we say at most Holy Communion services:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

The Holy Spirit that we, the Church, have received is not some separate power different to God the Father or Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is fully part of the one true God. It is not a vague ghostly power in the common useage of the word. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They cannot exist without each other.

The Holy Spirit is not something new, that suddenly appeared at Pentecost, but was present at creation and has spoken through the prophets ever since.

We get the feel of this indivisibility in our reading from John's Gospel. There is Philip saying, 'show us the Father and that will be enough for us'. And Jesus points out that anyone who has seen him has therefore seen the Father; they are indivisible, working through each other. But as he, Jesus, is returning to heaven from earth, the earthly presence of God will be continued by the Holy Spirit (or the Spirit of Truth) being a Counsellor for the Church.

What is a Counsellor? - An advocate fighting on one's side, a person strengthening and encouraging.

The Holy Spirit is the very presence of God at our side.

When you think about it, Pentecost is a momentous occasion that transforms a body of mere believers into a Church that is sanctified and empowered by God to do his work – in which God will be present in person. God will be in us as we reflect his purpose and proclaim the risen Christ who can forgive and heal all wrongdoing.

So, a Spirit-filled church will reflect the persona of God as revealed by Jesus Christ. It will live its life individually and corporately by the precepts of Christ's teachings and not conform to worldly norms. It will proclaim Christ to the unbeliever and be empowered to do what seems impossible except by the power of God. Like the church at Pentecost, it will be able to communicate to people of all backgrounds and all its members will be so empowered, from the weakest to the strongest. It will be a church full of the passion, energy and purpose of Christ as it lives its life and relates to its neighbours. Full of grace and love.

And therein lies the problem. Have you or I ever been in a completely spirit-filled church? We never will, this side of heaven. So, if we start from the point of acknowledging that we would like to be filled with more of the Holy Spirit than we currently are – then individually and as a church what do we do about it?

First of all, we should realise that church is not about a bucket half full or half empty. We should not see the Holy Spirit as a fuel that is consumed by what we do and needing periodic tank filling. The church is not a bucket. The Holy Spirit is not a fuel.

Secondly, we should see Church as a pipe through which the Holy Spirit flows. At God's end of the pipe there is an infinite reservoir of the Holy Spirit. To increase the flow through the church, we need to do two things. Remove blockages in the pipe through repentance on the things that are wrong. Then we should seek to increase the size of the pipe through prayer, study of the Word, encouraging each other – just like the things I noted earlier about the living faith of the early Church as a fellowship of believers. The flow through a pipe increases almost exponentially with an increase in its size. So, by way of encouragement, even small changes can bring large results.

Through the Holy Spirit we will receive guidance, wisdom, encouragement, energy, courage, compassion, forgiveness...all the things necessary to do God's bidding in this world.

So, as we mark Pentecost this year, let us work through the implications of this momentous gift of the Holy Spirit. How the church (including St Paul's in New Beckenham) is transformed from being a mere body of believers into a sanctified channel for the will of God to be revealed to the world. Let us realise we need to be spiritual Marmite with a clear taste that prompts non-believers to be amazed and ask what does it all mean.... and realising at times that some people will just not get it.

Let us realise that the Holy Spirit is about every single one of us being empowered to live lives as Children of the Light and to proclaim God's Mighty Word in Jesus Christ. It is not

about us indulgently basking in the Glory of Christ, but about us being 'In Christ' to the world. It's all about the authenticity and sincerity of our faith rather than how we rank our experience of manifestations of the Spirit.

I want to conclude this talk with the next song, which sums up the transformative power of the Holy Spirit as we proclaim Jesus Christ to the world about us in this our 150th year. In the words of the final verse, may the Holy Spirit help make us:

'Like a City bright,
so let us blaze;
lights in every street turning night into day:
and the darkness shall not overcome,
till the fulness of Christ's Kingdom comes,
dawning to God's eternal day.'

May the Lord, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit rise upon us. Amen.