

## Homily for the feast of Pentecost – 2022

Although today is called Whitsunday in the Prayer Book, it is most anciently called the Feast of Pentecost, a word which means ‘fiftieth day’ in Greek, counting the days from the Lord’s Resurrection until the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. This took place on the day of Pentecost, the fiftieth day after the celebration of the Jewish Feast of Passover. Symbolically it’s also the beginning of harvest in a Mediterranean climate. Whatever the layers of meaning that are there to be found in the name Pentecost, the first disciples of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ maintained this chronology to designate the fulfilment of the Easter Mystery in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the creation of the Church, and the “harvest” of Easter so to speak.

In Chapter two of the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke, the great historian of the apostolic church, paints a truly startling picture of the witness of the Church beginning in a collective outburst of enthusiasm, with the disciples overwhelmed by what sounded like a gale force wind along with what seemed like fire resting upon them releasing them into speech in foreign tongues, with such ecstasy that some bystanders assumed they were drunk. They weren’t, it was all happening too early in the day, as Peter noted, perhaps with a touch of humour (see verse 15).

Just the same, the crowd were bewildered and said: “*Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language, telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God?*” The descent of the Holy Spirit, and thus the creation of the Church, occurred in this eruption of a multiplicity of languages, in which the mighty works of God were praised and proclaimed accessibly to all and sundry.

So much can be said about the day of Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the small community of people who had followed Jesus during His ministry, deserted Him during his passion, and then experienced the overwhelming truth of His resurrection on the third day. Its always difficult NOT to dwell on what might be called the ‘para-normal external events’ of the coming of the Holy Spirit. That is: the mighty wind that filled the house, the tongues of fire that divided among

the witnesses to the resurrection and rested upon their heads, to say nothing of the many languages (16 are mentioned) that were spoken by the spirit filled witnesses.

Rather than go there today, I'd like to draw your attention to another aspect of Luke's recalling of the events of the day of Pentecost. Firstly though, in Chapter one of Acts, the very last words spoken by our Lord to the disciples are (Acts 1:8): "*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.*" These words show plainly that the Holy Spirit was promised by the Lord to those who were witnesses to His resurrection and that the gift of the Holy Spirit would give them power to proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to everyone.. everywhere!

Next, we are told in Ch 1 verses 12-14: that after the Lord's Ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and there... "*they constantly devoted themselves to prayer together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus.*"

Three vitally important words are found there in those brief but critically important verses. They are Power: the disciples would receive power when Holy Spirit came. Witness: The disciples were to be witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Prayer. The disciples waited upon the Lord to do as He said He would, by keeping a vigil of Prayer.

The day of Pentecost did come. As we heard in the first Lesson, it was a truly powerful event, an amazing event, a confronting event. Immediately after the end of today's first reading, Luke continues (Acts 2: 12-13) saying: '*All were amazed and perplexed, saying one to another "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said. "They are drunk with new wine!"*'

And then, straight away, right into this unique happening which nobody really understood and which some were already sneering about, Peter stood up, raised his voice and addressed the crowd. Yes Peter, who'd denied the Lord three times on the night of His arrest and trial. Peter, who's impetuosity had landed him in trouble before. Peter addressed the crowd, and there in Acts 2: 14-36 Luke faithfully records the first ever proclamation of the gospel to the world.

As is so often the case, there is not time in the space of a Sunday homily to

read Peter's address to you now but I beg you (as I so often do in my sermons) to do some homework and read Acts Chapter 2 later on today or during the coming week. However, I will (boldly, I admit), attempt a very brief summary of Peter's great address, by quoting just a little of it:

*“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 – 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. But God raised Him up, having freed Him from death, because it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. This Jesus God raised up and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit, this He has poured out, that you may see and hear. Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”*

Through prayer, the power of the Holy Spirit entered into the heart and mind of Peter on the very day of Pentecost and gave him the voice of a great witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Often forgotten is this remark in Acts Ch 2: 41 *“Those who welcomed Peter's message were baptised and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”*

The very same power was delivered to all those witnesses that day. And that very same power is still delivered to the church to this day. That power is the Spirit of the living God; the Holy Spirit; the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Always that power is always given for a good purpose for He is the Spirit of Wisdom, Understanding, Good judgement, Courage, Knowledge, Reverence and Godly Fear.

It is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of power, the Spirit of boldness that enables the church to proclaim in every age, just as Peter did on the day of Pentecost, that Jesus Christ is the Lord. He is risen from the dead. In Him lies our every hope for He is the first fruits of the new creation. It is the power of the Holy Spirit in the church that enables us to continue to issue the great call to all of

humanity, regardless of age, status or nationality: Repent, be baptised, receive the Holy Spirit and live the life of grace.

The Feast of Pentecost is a truly glorious day. Really this day when we commemorate the spectacular eruption by which the Church came to birth is, or it should be, the equal of Christmas and Easter. It is the day when we remember the countless ways in which the Holy Spirit shapes the Church as an institution and ourselves as faithful members of it. It is the day when once again we are reminded that, having received the Holy Spirit, we are required and we are enabled, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, to give witness to God's truth and to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord and God and that he is Risen.

Dear People, Let me quote St Paul (Romans 15:13) to finish: *'may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.'*