

Year A Feast of Pentecost 24th May 2026

Acts 2: 1-21. 1 Corinthians 12: 3b-13. John 20: 19-23

Today is of course the day we mark the effective birthday of the Church as result of the Holy Spirit dramatically descending on the followers of Jesus gathered together to celebrate the spring harvest and the revelation of the law to Moses.

Just think for a moment about how that might look today should the same thing happen. Because on that first Pentecost Jesus' followers were led by a bunch of fishermen, men who were uneducated in any academic sense, who would only have spoken Aramaic and who weren't much higher up the social scale of acceptability than shepherds, who were near the bottom of the pile.

Who would be their equivalent in today's world? My first thought, and I don't think it was that inappropriate, was our binmen and women. How seriously would they be taken if they started speaking in languages they didn't know? Not very, I suspect. Yet that is what those first fishermen did – and how and why did that happen? Principally because they trusted Jesus and had spent the previous 10 days praying fervently for Jesus to send the promised Holy Spirit.

As a result of their faithfulness it was easy for their listeners, who came from a whole range of countries, to understand the Good News being proclaimed to them.

But while we might understand, and hopefully personally experience, what the Holy Spirit does, it's much harder to actually describe the Holy Spirit. Our language isn't up to the job. Words fail us. Luke says ... And suddenly from heaven came a sound LIKE the rush of a violent wind. And he goes on Divided tongues, AS OF fire... In his description of Jesus' baptism, Luke the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form LIKE a dove.

And even Jesus can't give us an exact description. In his exchange with Nicodemus, Jesus says the wind blows where it wants to and you hear the sound of the wind but you don't know where it has come from or where it's going. That's what the Holy Spirit is LIKE, he tells Nicodemus.

So not wind, not fire, not a dove, but like each of them. So forgive me if I don't try to give an all-encompassing definition of the Holy Spirit, because I too don't

have the words to do so except to say that the Holy Spirit is clearly multi, multi-faceted.

What I do know is that Jesus promised to send his Spirit to live in all those who asked for it. That's exactly what happened that first Pentecost. The disciples were all gathered together in one place and the Holy Spirit fell on all of them. But they didn't get all the same gifts. It's the same today. All of us here have different gifts that we can exercise. It's what makes church a team. What use would a football team be if it was only made up of goalkeepers, or a cricket team that consisted of wicketkeepers? Each of us has our own unique set of gifts with which we can contribute to church or our homes or our work, but we all share in having the Holy Spirit – and that's to be celebrated, not to be worried about.

Many years ago Tony Bramley, our former much loved non-stipendiary, preached a wonderful sermon in St Mungo's, and I suspect probably used it here on another occasion, about how a fictional nervous SEC vestry that didn't like to rock the boat returned the gift of the Holy Spirit unopened because it all sounded too inconvenient and too dangerous and generally too much like hard work – not least because of all the fundraising that would have to be done to replace the roof blown off in a strong wind.

And we all know the havoc the wind can cause when we leave an outside door or a window wide open and paper blows all over the place and internal doors slam shut. But sometimes God needs to do that to grab our attention.

And that's the thing, God can and will act dramatically if he needs to. And some would say he needs to right now. For the past few years we have been a bit like the disciples, huddled together for fear of what is going on around us. And just as the pandemic receded from being life-threatening to something of a nuisance for most people, the world is seeing its longest war since Vietnam or perhaps the Iran-Iraq conflict, yet because it's closer to home to us in Europe the threat feels more existential. So, like the disciples we desperately want Jesus to say Peace be with you and receive the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost was one of the great Jewish feast days, celebrating harvest and the revelation of the law to Moses. The Greek word Pentekostos means 50<sup>th</sup> and Luke tells us this outpouring of the Spirit occurred 50 days after the resurrection.

And amazing as the imagery Luke uses is, the real point is that the Holy Spirit showed up, and not only showed up but transformed the lives of Jesus's followers, turning frightened, semi-literate fishermen into the Body of Christ, and giving them the confidence to share the good news to the extent that they persuaded 3,000 people to give their lives to Jesus that same day.

Pentecost is about God disrupting our normal way of doing things, of freeing us from our normal suspicious, tribal ways into a radical loving of our neighbours.

A lot is said about speaking in tongues, not all of it complimentary. Indeed, the scoffers thought it was a sign that Jesus' followers were all drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning. But for many people, praying in tongues that they don't understand is not meant for other people's benefit, but rather is a way of worshipping God in the knowledge that their own language is insufficient.

But Luke is talking about something very different. What Luke is talking about is the disciples talking in languages that were totally familiar to their listeners, even if not to themselves. This is the very opposite of the Tower of Babel story where God's deliberate introduction of different languages divided people and drove them apart.

Here the use of multiple languages draws people together rather than splitting them up. God birthed the church out of great difference, a lesson that, sadly, many Christians have yet to learn as they remain entrenched in the silos of their own rightness.

In our Acts reading Luke talks about disciples speaking in the mother tongue of 15 or so different groups of people who were all able to understand them perfectly.

Luke tells us that the onlookers were astonished and perplexed. It clearly wasn't the message that confused them, more the fact that God was choosing to speak to them in their own language with all the implications surrounding that. God was speaking across all sorts of barriers, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, you name it, precisely because God wanted them to know that God is the God for everyone and for them in particular. This Spirit-drenched place is for you, come on in was the underlying message. A message every individual church, let alone the Church universal, needs to reinforce week in, week out.

Extraordinary stuff. But it still happens today.

One of my favourite stories involves our old church in London, Holy Trinity Brompton. At one service they were worshipping in tongues and it became apparent that one woman's voice was soaring above the others to the point where everyone else stopped singing. After the service an Iranian member of the congregation went up to one of the clergy and asked who is this Prince of Peace that the singer was referring to. It turned out not only that the woman had been singing in Farsi, or Persian, but that she didn't know a word of Farsi. But God had used her to bring that particular person into a relationship with Jesus.

So the Holy Spirit is still at work today, both dramatically and also in quieter and subtler ways. Now, we're not going to see anything as dramatic in Penicuik as what happened at Pentecost, apart from anything else the numbers don't stack up. There would have been hundreds of thousands of people in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast.

But that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit isn't at work here or in West Linton or Edinburgh or Biggar or Peebles. Far from it, the Holy Spirit is always at work, and, importantly, according to each individual's nature and abilities.

In conclusion I want to return to what I was saying a few moments ago – that Pentecost as Luke describes it is for us all, especially for those who feel they have been battered by life for a whole variety of reasons, for those who feel unworthy, for those who feel God isn't interested in them.

This Spirit-drenched place is for you, come on in.