

Tidenham and Tutshill – Pentecost 26/5/23

Acts 2: 1-21 – The Promised Holy Spirit

Prayer

This afternoon – you may have noticed – marks the end of the football season, that is to say the last in the round of matches in the Premiership. There's still the FA Cup Final and some play-off finals and European finals and one or two internationals, which of course we can put to one side if like Anna we have no time for football. (Tutshill – today is definitely the end of the Fantasy Football season and it looks like no one can reach Matt Seward in the St Luke's League. To be confirmed next week!) If you are a fan of any sport, you love to be there, kicking every ball or – if it's tennis – hitting through every stroke. Or put sport aside, if you enjoy a good novel, you're caught up there with the characters. Or a work of art by a favourite artist – you can almost see through the artist's eyes. A favourite piece of music, whether it's Bach or Tina Turner – just sweeps you up...

Now imagine yourself back a couple of thousand years. You are meeting with Jesus' disciples in an upper room. It's quite early in the morning before the heat of the day. There are about 120 in the room and they are not discussing the football or the weather. It is the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks. This is when the people celebrated both the harvest and the giving of the Law, the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. Everyone meeting in that room was a good observant Jew, and so it's quite possible they were reciting the ancient liturgy of Pentecost – *Blessed art thou, O God of our fathers...* when something happened. It was the coming of the Holy Spirit just as Jesus had promised. For them it was an experience of wind and fire – those were the words they could use as they were caught up in something – or Someone – an experience so amazing and powerful that they were driven outside to proclaim the good news of Jesus to everyone in Jerusalem who would listen – and that day the streets were full of visitors, pilgrims...

...Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia – what did they make of it all? They had come from east, west, north and south to Jerusalem for the festival. For many I imagine it was a once-in-a-lifetime trip, like some Christians like to go to Oberammergau or Santiago da Compostela. These people in Jerusalem did not know Jesus; they had never heard of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly they could see these men and women and hear them and – remarkably – understand them. They were amazed and we are told that about three thousand came to Jesus that day. We shouldn't be surprised at such a figure – it fits in with what we know from revivals down the ages.

But this day of Pentecost was unique. God was doing something new, and often in Scripture when God did something new it was accompanied by signs and wonders. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to his people. Here in Acts 2 we find his promised fulfilled, and the Lord did not want them to be in any doubt about it. I invited you to imagine being there, but we are not there then; we are here now. We cannot recreate or relive this event, but – and this is a large BUT – the story of receiving the Holy Spirit is our story too.

The Parthians and the Medes and the rest of that crew came as strangers to the story of Jesus. If they had heard of him at all, it was as a religious teacher who had been found wanting by the authorities to the extent that he had been executed. Last week David was talking about witnessing and it is hard witnessing to Jesus when many, even most around us think that we have moved on from church, Christianity and Jesus. And in one sense every year we do move further from Jesus. It's hard for us to imagine the daily realities of his life in first century Israel, the culture, the weather and food of Jesus' day. We don't understand his language or rather languages – Jesus used Aramaic for every-day,

Hebrew in the synagogue and probably had some of the rough Greek that was the *lingua franca*, the common language for the eastern Mediterranean. And yet – has this not struck you as rather odd? – we worship Jesus here as our contemporary – as the first century Jew who understands twenty-first century English – or possibly a bit older for some of our worship and definitely older for some of our hymns. From the pages of the New Testament Jesus speaks to us; we hear his voice. And in our worship we pray, assuming he understands what we are saying.

At the heart of witnessing and worshipping is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the great translator, bringing Jesus to us and us to Jesus. John Taylor who was one of the great missionary scholars of the last century talked about the Holy Spirit as the Go-Between God – bridging the gap between Jesus and us.

And the Holy Spirit is the unseen power behind the disciples' new-found courage and boldness. After his resurrection Jesus told them to go into all the world and proclaim the gospel. If you're given an instruction like that, where do you start? I suppose they were willing to go – well, sort of, but where do we find them? In a room shut away! Perhaps some of them had their flipchart, working out their vision, values and strategy – OK maybe not. Maybe it was a bit like trying to start the car with a dead battery – *make noise*. Where's the oomph? The oomph is the work of the Spirit. But as David indicated last week it's not always easy to feel excited about witnessing to Jesus in a sceptical world. Maybe we need a fresh outpouring of the Spirit? Sounds scary...

... but maybe we can look at it this way. I began by thinking about different experiences where we are taken out of ourselves – in sport or a story or great art or music – transported we might say. Now a Christian is someone who lives in two worlds. On the one hand we very much live in the world we see around us – a world of working, sleeping, playing, eating, drinking, coughing, suffering, having fun. It's all very tangible, we can touch it physically. But we also live at the same time in another world – the spiritual. All around us, the world of angels and archangels. In our liturgy today we use the phrase – *Holy, holy holy, Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of your glory*. We can see beyond the physical with the eyes of faith. We may live on earth but we are not earth-bound. It is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit to bring us here in T... something of the joy of heaven, God's world. It's the work of the Holy Spirit to help us as we worship to glimpse something from beyond, God's glory and wonder, and even if we can't feel it or sense to know by faith that this is God's world of glory. The truth is that there is more than we can see, our routines, even our worship. From four hundred years after Jesus there's a story that we have to translate into our very different world, but we can do that – it's a story from the monks of the Egyptian desert –

Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said, *Father according as I am able I keep my little rule and my little fast, my prayer, my meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of wrong thoughts; now what more should I do?* The elder rose up to reply and stretched up his hands to heaven and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said, *Why not be totally changed into fire?*

Or as Charles Wesley put it centuries later:

*O thou who camest from above,
the fire celestial to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart.
There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze...*

And contemporary... let's use this from Tim Hughes as a prayer to bring this part of our gathering to a close:

Consuming fire, fan into flames
A passion for Your name
Spirit of God, would You fall in this place
Lord, have Your way
Lord have Your way with us

Stir it up in our hearts, Lord
Stir it up in our hearts, Lord
Stir it up in our hearts, a passion for Your name.

The Collect:

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, ignite in us your holy fire; strengthen your children with the gift of faith, revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Post Communion Prayer:

Faithful God, who fulfilled the promises of Easter by sending us your Holy Spirit and opening to every race and nation the way of life eternal: open our lips by your Spirit, that every tongue may tell of your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Blessing:

May the Holy Spirit draw you ever closer to Jesus.

May the Holy Spirit produce in you the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

May the Holy Spirit equip you with your particular gifts in ministry.

May the Holy Spirit give you the tongues to proclaim the good news in your community and street.

May the Holy Spirit blast us clear from any complacency, and be the dynamite to propel us out with the good news of Jesus into every corner of this place.

May the Holy Spirit be the wind in our wings, the fire in our bellies and the gentle still small voice in our souls.

Amen.