

For all who are far away

A sermon preached by Rev Charles Draper on Pentecost Sunday 15 May 2016 at St Peter's Church Wolvercote

From Christmas through to Ascension Day we have followed the story of Jesus – those amazing events that still inspire us 2000 years later.

But Pentecost is different because it's not about remembering what happened 2000 years ago. Pentecost is about what is going to happen – here in this church – even today. The clue is in the few words that come later on in Acts chapter 2 – the story of Pentecost – when St Peter says:

*'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and **you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for **all who are far away**, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'*

You know the bit I like here? "For all who are far away" because that means you and me, here in this church, this morning. *Those who are far away* means us and what St Peter is saying is that the promise is for us. When he says "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" he is speaking to us too. Just as Jesus' disciples discovered the life of the Holy Spirit that day, so we are offered the same Holy Spirit today.

We may not speak in other languages. We may not have tongues of flame on our heads. We may not hear the sound of a violent wind. But none of those things matter. What matters is that the same Holy Spirit that was discovered by Jesus' disciples on the day of Pentecost is offered to you and me today.

It's an exciting story – the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Bible – a story that is often missed. It goes right back to the time of Creation, that strange wind from God that swept over the face of the waters and the animating Spirit that gives life to the first human beings.

Throughout the Old Testament the Holy Spirit appears fleetingly here and there. From over-excited prophets dancing with joy to kings and priests anointed with the Spirit for their leadership. Or the craftsmen whose artistry is inspired by the Spirit. Indeed the word Inspired means literally to have the Spirit in us. But there are also passages in all the major prophets that look forward to a time when the Holy Spirit will come for us all. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and also Joel all look forward to a coming new age of the Spirit.

In the time of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was thought to be absent, no longer active in the world. So it is a big moment when the Holy Spirit alights on Jesus like a dove at his baptism. Both Luke and John make it clear that it's the Holy Spirit who gives life and power to Jesus' ministry. So Jesus came, not only to die for us, not only to show us the love and forgiveness of God, but also as the bringer of the Spirit.

Both Luke and John give us the exciting hope that when Jesus ascends to the Father, the Holy Spirit will be poured out, no longer limited to prophets, priests and kings but, as St Peter says in our reading today, *on all flesh*. This, St Peter says, is what the prophets spoke of and now it is happening, before your eyes. And, he says, *it is for you*.

But what is the Holy Spirit? Put simply, it is the life, the presence and the power of God right here, in our midst, in our lives, not far away and remote. God, present and active, in our lives, in our church and in our world. And this is what we need. This is what turns us from a church that meets to remember what happened 2000 years ago to a church that knows the risen Jesus here with us today. This is what makes our worship not only beautiful liturgy and music but also an encounter with the living God. And this is where we realise we don't have to struggle by our own efforts to follow the example of Jesus but in some strange way we can start to discover the life of Jesus actually living in us.

When Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, he made all this very clear – that this small vulnerable precarious early church was animated, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It has been suggested that a better title would be the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, rather than the apostles, who is taking the lead, and who gives the early church such freshness and life. And this is, of course, what the church still needs today wherever we are, even here in Wolvercote.

Let's put it a different way. During the lead up to GCSEs and A Levels, we've started a discipline of turning off the house Internet at about 10.30pm to make sure we all get enough sleep. But it's the grown-ups it catches out! Jane is working on last minute changes to our online grocery order before going to bed when we both agree to turn the Internet off. And then we're both wondering why we can't make the grocery order work...

Or the time we went away for a couple of days and set the TV box to record a programme while we were away. But just before we left, for safety I pulled the aerial plug out. When we came back I wondered why the recording had failed... But it just doesn't record well with the aerial pulled out!

To put it in this language – the church has been "on line" since the Day of Pentecost – online to God – online to the Holy Spirit. But sometimes the church can be a little bit like Jane and I, trying to make our grocery order work with the internet switched off. It all looks fine – but it just doesn't quite work.

I remember being struck by this when I went on retreat at the end of my second curacy. There was a line from an Isaiah reading that jumped out of the page for me: "*I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing*". And the harsh realisation was that I had been working very hard, but all by my own efforts, not depending on God, not trusting in God's Spirit. And I had done some good work – yet somehow it was lifeless, not life giving.

If we work by our own efforts, not by the life of the Spirit, then often we end up feeling dried out, barren, lifeless. But if we can be humble enough to realise our dependence on the Holy Spirit, then we can discover that even our failures can somehow be life giving and fruitful. And perhaps that's the clue – recognising our need. I always feel sorry for the disciples in that period of waiting after the Ascension. We know that after nine days of waiting comes Pentecost. They didn't. For all they knew, they could have been waiting there in Jerusalem forever. I'm guessing that after 7 or 8 days they were getting pretty desperate. But perhaps that desperation itself made them ready – losing their self confidence, losing their sureness in themselves - made them ready and willing to welcome and receive God's Spirit into their lives. Thomas Merton often speaks of the importance of emptiness in prayer. You cannot fill a bowl that is already full.

So what does all this mean for us? Maybe we need to ask ourselves – are we empty enough? Do we want God's Holy Spirit to breathe his life into our lives, and into our church? And be clear – there are no right answers here. We can only come to God as we are, and say what we actually feel.

But if we do want our lives and our church to be filled with the life of the Holy Spirit, then we only have to ask. Every time we get up in the morning, we can ask for God's Spirit to fill us afresh for this new day. And every time we come to church we can ask for the life of the Spirit to fill our worship. And above all of course, every time we come to Communion, we offer to God our empty hands, ready to receive the new life of Christ.

So Pentecost is special – but it is not just one Sunday. It can be Pentecost for us every day. Pentecost is an invitation for us to come, like Jesus' disciples, and to offer to God our emptiness, and to discover what difference it can make, when we welcome the life of the Spirit into our lives and into our church.