

## **The excitement of Pentecost**

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Pentecost Sunday, 9 June 2019 in St Peter's Wolvercote.

*Refs: Acts 2.1-21; Romans 8.14-17; John 14.8-17*

Why is it that, after thirty years in ministry, I still get so excited about Pentecost? Why of all the Festivals in the church's year, is Pentecost the one I get most excited about?

Of course, it's an exciting story – tongues of flame and the sound of a rushing violent wind with an exciting message:

*"In the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams."*

I think there are several reasons why I find Pentecost particularly exciting. To begin with, it's a story about now. Most of our Christian Festivals are about events that happened 2000 years ago. They are all still very much true for today, but it's Pentecost that makes the connection, Pentecost that brings those events of 2000 years ago into our present-day reality.

In our reading today from Acts 2 we hear the beginning of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Later in the chapter, his sermon ends with these words:

*"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."*

I love those words "all who are far away" because that means you and me – 2000 years later and 3000 miles away. St Peter is including us, here today, in his message, and in the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost we are not talking about something a long time ago and a long way away. We're talking about us, here, this morning, in Wolvercote. The gift of the Holy Spirit is for us – for you and for me – today.

To be personal for a moment, Pentecost is exciting for me because this is something I discovered for the first time as a young adult. I was brought up in a Christian home and went to church all my life. As a child I was taught about God as Creator and Father. And I was taught about Jesus, his life and his teaching, his death and his resurrection. But I was not taught about the Holy Spirit. I knew there was something called Whitsun but it all sounded rather obscure. And somehow by calling it Whitsunday, short for White Sunday, it had become rather colourless. I am glad we call it Pentecost today and that we wear red - the colour of fire!

My childhood was in the sixties, before the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit had swept through the church. It was in my University days that I first discovered the Holy Spirit as something, or should I say, someone who is real, powerful, alive, who we could experience in our lives, who could turn our faith from a set of intellectual ideas and beliefs to something we could feel, experience and know – who could bring our faith to life and make our experience of God real and exciting.

That sense of excitement has never left me. Of course, I've had doubts, questions, periods of dryness and emptiness, times when it has felt unreal and far away. We all have seasons in our faith – winter as well as summer and springtime. And yet like springtime, it always comes back. Somehow, the excitement of Pentecost is something that never quite goes away.

I have other reasons to be excited about Pentecost. One thing I love is that the Holy Spirit is no respecter of churchmanship or denominations. Evangelical or Catholic, Free church or Anglican - it makes no difference to

the Holy Spirit. In my University days, it was the Catholic Society – the Roman Catholics - who led the way in seeking for the renewal of the Spirit. Over the years I have heard stories of the renewing life of the Spirit in every kind of church, every kind of churchmanship, and every denomination. I think that's wonderful. The Holy Spirit is inclusive, not divisive.

Another thing that excites me about Pentecost is the way the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see things in new ways, to make fresh discoveries and find new insights. At the end of our gospel reading today, Jesus talks of the Holy Spirit as the Advocate, the one who comes alongside us. Later in the same discourse he says that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit: *"will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you,"* and that, *"he will testify on my behalf."*

Interestingly Jesus also says: *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..."*

I think this is saying that part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to help us to understand more deeply what the good news of Jesus means for us.

To take one example: it's great to have Sarah presiding at our Communion service today. And Shei presiding next week. And Jo presiding on Ascension Day. And Viv, presiding over Easter. And I'm very glad that we take it for granted and none of us turn a hair. Yet 50 years ago it was so very different. Women priests were a distant dream, and gifts that women have to offer were still being ignored.

I believe this is just one of many examples of the leading of the Holy Spirit, opening our eyes to see what the gospel of Jesus means. And very strikingly it's in the words of our reading from Acts:

*"I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy"*

Peter here is quoting from the prophet Joel, hundreds of years before, who shows us that when the Holy Spirit comes, differences between male and female, and free men and slaves, will no longer matter – all are equal recipients of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In many other ways I believe that the Holy Spirit is continuing to open our eyes, never leading us away from the Gospel, but always helping us to understand more deeply what the Gospel of Christ means.

Someone may say the world got there before we did. When it came to equality of women and men, the church only was a follower not a leader. Of course that's true – and it leads me to yet another thing that excites me about Pentecost. I don't believe the Holy Spirit is limited to the church. I believe the Holy Spirit is at work out in the world as well, and this is how God changes the world.

I remember back in the 1980s, when there was a terrible famine in Ethiopia. And it was not a member of the church, but Bob Geldorf who jumped up and down and got everyone to do something about it. Something or someone prodded him into action. I believe it was the Holy Spirit. And that's what gives me hope about the future of the world, that the Holy Spirit is at work, both inside the church and outside it, prodding us, cajoling us, energising us and empowering us, to bring change and transformation to our world, to bring healing to God's Creation. He is the creative Spirit, the healing Spirit and the life-giving Spirit. How much we need the creative healing Holy Spirit in our world! How much we need the life-giving Spirit in our churches! How much we need the refreshing and energising life of the Spirit in our individual lives!

I love Jesus' picture of the Living Water of the Holy Spirit. I've stood by a waterfall in the Lake District and listened to the thunderous roar of the water, marvelling at the power of it, but noticing also how all around it, the grass and the plants and the trees and the mosses and ferns are bursting with life, all nourished by that living water. And I have stood on a beach and watched the waves breaking on the beach and listened to the power of the waves as the tide comes in and cleanses and refreshes the beach.

So, I would encourage us all to pray for that life-giving power of God's Holy Spirit. Pray for the Spirit in our world, bringing healing to our wounded world. Pray for the Spirit in our churches, giving us the new life we need so much. And pray for the Spirit in our own hearts and lives, breathing on the embers of our faith, and fanning into flame the fire of love in our hearts.

As our Collect says:

*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.*

**Amen.**