

Transforming Earth with the Power of Heaven

A sermon preached by *Dr Tony Lemon* at 10.00am at St Peter's, Wolvercote, on Sunday 27th May, 2012.

Readings: Ezekiel 37, 1-14; Acts 2, 1-21; John 15, 16-27 and 16, 4b-15.

If Pentecost means anything to most people, it probably makes them think of Pentecostalism – and that probably brings to mind a rather wild form of Christian experience, outside the mainstream of church life, involving much waving of arms and speaking in tongues. It's easy to forget that all Christians, not just Pentecostals, derive their meaning from the coming of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost.

For a first-century Jew, Pentecost was the fiftieth day of the Passover. It was an agricultural festival, when people brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop, and offered it to God. But also, along with the Passover, it awakened memories of the Exodus from Egypt, when God rescued his people. Fifty days after the Passover, the Israelites came to Mount Sinai where Moses received the law. So Pentecost was about God giving to his redeemed people the commandments by which he wanted them to live. In both cases Pentecost symbolised new beginnings – the first fruits of the harvest, the establishment of God's law. The first Christian Pentecost is a beginning too: this time God is coming down again – so soon after Jesus has gone up to heaven in the Ascension – but this time not with a written law carved in stone, but with the dynamic energy of the Spirit bringing laws designed to be written upon human hearts. Luke, the author of Acts, uses images of wind and fire to convey a sense of what it was like on that first day of Pentecost, and many Christians of different traditions have used similar images to describe what it is like when the Spirit is manifest in the lives of individuals and communities.

The concept of the Spirit was not new – it is found throughout the Old Testament. In the creation story the Spirit brooded over the face of the waters as the curtain rose on creation. The Spirit was active throughout the whole chequered history of Israel. But like many ideas in the Old Testament, the idea of the Spirit remains vague and shadowy, with no defined functions. In our reading of that strange passage from Ezekiel this morning the Lord promises to put his spirit within those whom he brings back from their graves, but there is no clue as to the nature or purpose of that spirit. The same is true when the prophet Joel promises, in the passage cited in our reading from Acts, to 'pour out his spirit upon all flesh' in the last days. So this vague Old Testament concept is little help in understanding the nature of the Holy Spirit that God sends down at Pentecost. This is probably why Jesus makes little reference to the spirit during the course of his ministry – he would not have wanted to confuse his listeners whose concept of the spirit would be an Old Testament one. Only in the 'Farewell Discourses' – the final chapters of St. John's Gospel – does he do so, because by then Jesus needs to prepare the disciples for his leaving them as an earthly companion.

It was Jesus' task to reinterpret the role of the Spirit to the disciples, and through them, to the early Christian communities and so to all subsequent generations of Christians. Even the disciples themselves, who have had the unique privilege of walking, listening, talking, eating, drinking and praying with Jesus cannot for ever depend on this living presence to be their guide. They have to be prepared, as children

have to be prepared, for the time of separation. All the generations who follow them will know only separation, in this literal, earthly sense. The point of the Spirit is not at all to give people a spirituality which makes the things of earth irrelevant, but rather to bring God's creative power to do its work, through his disciples – the first disciples and all who would follow them – *on earth: to transform earth with the power of heaven*, starting with the followers of Jesus as a gathered community at the first day of Pentecost.

In describing the events of the first Pentecost in Acts, Luke clearly wants to do justice to a force that began a great movement – something strong enough to explain once central, undeniable fact at the heart of Christian history: the fact that a small, largely uneducated group of men, puzzled and frightened, meeting behind locked doors, could so quickly be transformed to be a force to be reckoned with across the known world, laying the base of the Christian church as Jesus intended them to do – the base of what remains to this day the world's largest religious faith. To do this Luke uses the imagery of wind and fire – imagine a fleet of sailing ships launched to sea by a strong wind or one of those Australian bush fires started by a few flames and rapidly spreading.

In his commentary on Acts, Tom Wright speaks of being 'out there in the wind, letting it sweep through your life, your heart, your imagination, your powers of speech' with transformative effect. This imagery of wind and fire, and speaking in tongues, probably present difficulties for most of us. Are these things the norm, and are they what we should all expect to experience and feel? If this were the case, a great many Christians would feel left out and inadequate: many no doubt do, and this is a great shame. Tom Wright also recognises that 'there are many times in the life of the church, when the spirit works softly and secretly, quietly transforming people's lives and situations without any big noise or fuss.' Many if not most of us have probably not had the kind of experience shared by the apostles on that first day of Pentecost. Some people do indeed continue to have powerful, transformative experiences. But for others many things make such experiences unlikely, whether it be simply personality or the influence of education and the technological and scientific sophistication of the world in which we are conditioned. For most Christians our experience is one of continuing to work steadily and patiently in quiet but confident faith – a faith no less important in God's eyes, for I simply cannot believe that he designed a faith whose requirements rule out the majority of his human creation.

In Charles Wesley's deeply moving hymn, which we sung this morning, he speaks of God imparting 'the fire celestial', asking him to 'Kindle a flame of sacred love, on the mean altar of my heart'. How many of us must identify with those words! As we confront our own weaknesses and doubts it is some comfort to know that the very men Jesus himself chose as his first disciples failed so completely, even after their companionship with Jesus and the preparation which he had given them. For all their privileged companionship with Jesus, their faith collapsed at the time of crisis: 'They all left him and fled' – Mark 14, v50.

Yet we all know what those eleven disciples were able to achieve – hugely encouraged yet puzzled by Jesus' resurrection appearances, then strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit. On such slender foundations, Jesus was indeed able to build

his church. In the book of Acts the apostles frequently meet opposition, incredulity, scoffing and sneering. In the same way today many people declare that we are wasting our time and talking incomprehensible nonsense – ‘medieval mumbo-jumbo’ seems to be the favoured phrase – not to mention the so-called new atheists who regard all religion as positively harmful. In the face of such pressures we may feel tempted to retreat into a very private faith – concerned to make sure that we look like ordinary, ‘normal’ people. But had the apostles retreated in the face of such pressures, anxious not to stand out from the crowd, there would be no Christian church today. There is a challenge for all of us, and for our churches, in the story of the first Pentecost. We do not need to speak in tongues or imitate the wilder elements of what is now known as Pentecostalism, but we should seek to ensure that our churches have enough energy, enough Spirit-driven life, to be noticed, and to make an impact on the wider community. Recently I read Michael Stockford’s immensely enjoyable ‘Memories of Upper and Lower Wolvercote’ and sensed the importance of the church as very much a part of the community in the earlier days he recalls. Today this is harder to achieve, but it is things like the Community Cafe, the secular uses of our new and refurbished rooms, the services we hold in Cutteslowe, the Fair Trade stall in the Farmers’ Market and the Wolvercote and Wytham Festival all help to bring the church and the community together, helping our churches to impact the lives of those around us. So too do the special events which bring in those who do not often come to church, both the major festivals and those marking personal landmarks of baptism, marriage and funerals. In these and more individual ways we need to feel glad to show that the Spirit is truly at work in our church, unashamed to proclaim our Christian faith in the communities in which we live and work.