

Wind and Fire

A sermon preached by *Dr Tony Lemon* at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 8.00am and All Saints, Wytham, on Sunday 12th June 2011

Acts ch.2 vv.1-4

While the day of Pentecost was running its course they were all together in one place, when suddenly there came from the sky a noise like that of a strong driving wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire, dispersed among them and resting on each one, And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them the power of utterance.

For most people, including Christians, today is probably 'Whit Sunday'. 'Pentecost' is much less used, and if this term means anything to most people today, it is probably something to do with 'Pentecostalism', signifying a growing group of churches associated with a seemingly somewhat wild form of Christian religious experience, outside the mainstream of church life in Britain, involving a lot of noise and waving of arms, and of course speaking in tongues. We often forget that all Christians derive meaning from the events on that day of Pentecost described in Acts. We think of it as the first Pentecost, but as our lesson makes clear, this was an established Jewish festival – these momentous events occurred 'While the day of Pentecost was running its course'. Today happens to be 'Open Farm Sunday', which is rather appropriate, because Pentecost was in fact an agricultural festival – the day when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop and offered it to God, both in gratitude and as a prayer that the rest of the crop would be safely gathered in: a prayer that many English farmers must be echoing at this time after so many weeks of dry weather. For Jews both Passover and Pentecost also awakened memories of the Exodus from Egypt – Passover recalls the night the Israelites escaped across the Red Sea and into the Sinai desert, and Pentecost recalls the fiftieth day of the Exodus when they came to Mount Sinai, where Moses received the law. So for Jews Pentecost is about the way God gave to his redeemed people the ways in which they were to live their lives according to his purposes.

There are parallels between those events on Mount Sinai and the first Christian Pentecost. When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, Moses left them to go up the mountain, and eventually came down with the law. At the Ascension which we celebrated last week Jesus goes up to heaven, and then at Pentecost he comes down again, not with a written law carved on tablets of stone, but with the dynamic energy of the law which is to be written on human hearts. Luke uses images of wind and fire to convey what it was like, and such images have since been used by many Christians to describe what it is like to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The wind came from heaven – bringing some of God's creative power to do its work, through his disciples, on earth. The point is not at all to give people a spirituality which makes the things of earth irrelevant – rather it is to transform earth with the power of heaven, starting with the followers of Jesus as a community: they are all gathered in one place, and the spirit comes not to divide but to unite. So Pentecost complements the Ascension: Jesus may have finally left his disciples on earth, but now his energy, the power to be and do something quite new, becomes available to all who call on him, all who are wish to follow him.

The imagery of wind and fire, and of speaking in tongues, probably presents 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: some no doubt do, and this is a great shame. There are many times in the Gospels, and there have been many times in the life of the church, when the spirit works softly and secretly, quietly transforming and guiding people's lives without any noise or fuss. But in describing the events of the first Pentecost in Acts, Luke clearly wants to describe something new and fundamental, something that launched a great movement – imagine a fleet of sailing ships launched to sea by a strong wind or a bush fire started by a few flames and rapidly spreading. Such imagery is needed to explain something which is undeniable historical fact: the fact that a small group of largely uneducated men, puzzled and frightened as we have seen them to be in our Gospel reading today, meeting behind locked doors, could so quickly be transformed into a force to be reckoned with across the known world, laying the base for what remains to this day the world's largest religious faith.

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 remarkable experiences which enable them to know at first-hand how directly powerful and life-transforming God can be. But for others many things may make such experiences unlikely, whether it be personality or the influence of education and the technological and scientific sophistication of the world in which we are conditioned. So for most Christians our experience is one of continuing to work steadily and patiently in quiet but confident faith. We can rest assured that such faith is every bit as important in the eyes of God as that which derives from more dramatic experiences.

The noise of wind and fire, Luke tells us, brought everyone out of their homes, coming together as a crowd that included people from many nations who lived in Jerusalem at the time – Luke gives us a detailed list of countries (one of those passages that most people hope they will not be called to read in church!). At that time everyone's second language was Greek – since the conquests of Alexander the Great four centuries earlier, Greek had been for much of the world what English is for many people today. Many people would also know some Latin, thanks to the Roman Empire gradually imposing itself on many of the countries formerly conquered by Greece. But on this day of Pentecost, it appears, they had no need to translate: all heard in their own first language. This was not the gift of tongues as we often imagine it to be in modern Pentecostalism – a succession of words and sounds which no one can understand. Nor was it the confusion of languages which prevented the people of Babel from understanding one another as they built their foolish and notorious tower. Rather the apostles, these uneducated Galileans, appear to speak in all the various languages of their listeners – as if in fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, which followed the Babel story, that all the families of the earth will be blessed: now, at Pentecost, the whole human race is going to be addressed with the good news of what has happened in and through Jesus.

To cynics in the crowd it all sounded like the slurred and babbling speech of those who have had too much to drink. But in one of those earthy, realistic touches which for me bring authenticity to Bible narratives, Peter points out that it is only nine in the morning, so they cannot be drunk – perhaps not a compelling argument for ravers in Ibiza today, but pretty conclusive in first century Jerusalem! In the book of Acts the apostles frequently meet opposition, incredulity, scoffing and sneering. In the same way today there are plenty of people who 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 Christianity and all religious faith as positively harmful. In the face

of such pressures there is a tendency for Christians to retreat into a very private faith – concerned to keep up safe appearances and to make sure that they look like ordinary, ‘normal’ people – so keeping quiet about their faith and their churchgoing in an age and society which is increasingly and stridently secular. There is a challenge for all Christians, and for our churches, in this story of the first Pentecost. Whilst we should hardly wish to be accused of being drunk at nine in the morning, we should perhaps all ask ourselves whether our churches today have enough energy, enough spirit-driven new life, to make onlookers pass comment at all? What impact do we make on the community? Things like the Rogation Day beating the bounds in Wytham, the St Peter’s fair-trade stall in the Farmers’ Market and the church participation in the Wolvercote and Wytham Festival are small things in themselves but help to bring the church and the community together, helping our churches to project themselves to people around us. In these and many other ways we need to feel glad to show that the spirit is truly at work in our churches, unashamed to proclaim our Christian faith in the communities in which we live and work.