

20th May 2018
COTHA SERVICE

St Michael's, Amersham

Pentecost Sunday 2018

Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen

Maybe it's hard for us to appreciate that the Christian Whit-Sunday has its origins in a Jewish Harvest Festival, yet that is actually what Pentecost was initially about. It's the Greek name for Shavuot, one of three Jewish pilgrim festivals and it's called Pentecost because it's fifty days since the last festival which was Passover.

Fifty days ago things were very different for Jesus and his followers. Fifty days ago, betrayal and denial were in the air. Fifty days ago, there was a cross and a tomb.

And in this intervening period the disciples have met with resurrection. The presence of Jesus has been manifested among them and slowly but surely there has been a growing confidence that the cross wasn't the end of the Jesus' story.

So now the crowds, they are re-gathering once more in Jerusalem. It's a time of celebrating God's goodness with a harvest. And it's now that everything seems to come together with a new sense of confidence and the idea of Pentecost is born!

Now, to be truthful the bible does not speak with a single voice about the Holy Spirit. In one sense to talk of the Spirit of God is simply to talk of God's activity among us.

In today's gospel from John 15 we read of The Spirit of Truth.

The Spirit is essentially God at work in the world. It's the presence of God and his goodness blessing our lives and communities.

And in that sense the Spirit was around long before Pentecost.

We might also observe on a day such as this just how untidy God can be!

Against a back drop of so much prescribed liturgy and tradition the Day of Pentecost comes across as a time when God moves outside the box, it's almost as if God is exploding with life, colour, energy and light. The dynamic of this day isn't so much a quiet service of Evensong in some quaint cathedral (just the sort of worship I love, by the way!), it's more reminiscent of the crowds at either Windsor or Wembley yesterday!

Pentecost is rich in symbolism. There's the disciples speaking in other languages so that this international pilgrimage crowd can all understand the message of God's love in their own tongue.

Some think of it as Babel being put back together again. In place of confusion this is a message that can make us one and give us a common language of goodness, kindness, love and justice.

So what is the symbolism here? Isn't it about inclusivity? God's Spirit, God's life, God's love is open to all, can be experienced by all, understood and made personal to all.

God doesn't just speak ubiquitous English – he also communicates in the Bung language of Cameroon, now almost extinct with only three speakers left.

The point is surely this – God is not only present in my world, my language, my culture, or even my spirituality – by his Spirit God is also present in the 'other'. I can never lock God in because he continuously breaks out of the box.

Maybe we in the Church have been the worst at being prescriptive.

All of us from the three congregations on The Hill have our own distinctive in worship and it's good for us to experience each other's liturgy. We can become so accustomed to our own way of being that we forget God is not a Methodist, Baptist, Anglican or URC!

Part of belonging to COTHA is the challenge to respect the holy ground upon which others walk.

I was on my way to church one morning and there were grumblings at the door – this was elsewhere you understand! The Liturgical Dance Group were doing a presentation that day and quite a few in the congregation were not keen on liturgical dance. And then a retired, much loved senior minister arrived. He was a well-respected preacher among us and people suspected he didn't like liturgical dance much either! Surely, he could be counted in amongst the grumblers? Yet when he was told it would be happening that morning he simply smiled and said how much he was looking forward to it and hoped that God would speak to him through it. Such openness, such respect for the way God might work outside his comfort zone, totally took the wind out of the sails of those complaining that morning and taught us all a valuable lesson in being willing to respect God at work in all sorts of ways.

So one Pentecostal lesson for us today is that God doesn't only speak our language!

Another comes our way in those intriguing 'tongues' of fire that settled upon the disciples that day.

Fire is often the symbolism of The Spirit, representing as it does both energy and light.

Yet, as is so often the case, this might have been a 'borrowed' symbol.

Because in those far off days the Roman Empire minted its coins showing a tongue of fire resting over Caesar's head.

So the account of Pentecost in Acts equates this sort of energy not to an earthly Emperor but to the followers of Jesus, prompting the question: how will our lives display something of God's warmth and energy today?

We meet at the end of Christian Aid Week – indeed after the service many of us will be joining up with hundreds of others central London to Circle The City on a sponsored walk for Christian Aid.

We want to put energy into the ongoing quest by Christian Aid to be focus for justice and compassion.

Pentecost Sunday, and those living, burning flames – described as

'tongues of fire' remind us of the energy and life that needs to be a characteristic of our individual and communal pilgrimage.

And a third and final lesson from that day in Jerusalem comes from the rushing wind – all part of the imagery on a day full of symbolism, reminding us that without the breath of God so much of our faith would remain limp and lifeless.

On this day we often depict the Spirit as a bird. But today why don't we picture ourselves that way. We fly up over the hills or fields and it's OK – we are getting somewhere but it's hard work. And then we find a thermal, a current of air that seems to lift us higher. We are being supported. We are being helped on our journey. We are being assisted by an unseen, yet real force – wind and air, that carries us along.

And that too is surely a Pentecostal picture for us this Sunday. For there are times when we sense that help in our lives – God's help, God's energy – the wind of the Spirit helping us fly.

This week a number of folk from COTHA churches have been involved in seven days of Accompanied Prayer. A time when they have sort out these currents of God's help and energy.

Pentecost, I think, makes the point that after the cross and resurrection that 'partnership' between Jesus and his disciples didn't end and neither did the mission of Jesus.

God was at work in Jesus, and that work continues in our world today through the breath and life of The Spirit. The Spirit of truth.

We can describe and experience it in so many ways – it's energy, light, wisdom, compassion, endurance and vision – and so much more.

Essentially, it's the idea that God is always with us and always at work among us through the work of His Spirit.

May that ever be our Pentecostal experience in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

