

## Sermon on Acts 2 – Pentecost Sunday

St Nicholas Cuddington, Holy Communion 10 AM, 19 May 2024

Acts 2.1-22 (and John 15.26–27, 16.4b–15)

*Come, Holy Spirit, our Advocate! Fill the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle in us the fire of your Love. AMEN.*

Good morning, and a very happy Pentecost Sunday to you all ... I have it on reliable authority that this is a pivotal day in the life of Premier League Football. Hope springs eternal, but it does look like long-suffering Arsenal fans may need to gird their loins with patience for another year. There are of course plenty of even more important things going on in other parts of the world, including the continued grinding misery of war in Ukraine, in Gaza, in Sudan.

And there's more: TikTok and the Guardian won't be telling you about it, but for the church this is an important festival too!

Pentecost Sunday is the day on which we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Our reading from the Book of Acts finds the original apostles gathered with their friends in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Weeks or *Shavuot*, seven weeks or 50 days after Passover – and after the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus.

By the time of Jesus, the Old Testament celebration of that Festival had taken on additional meaning. It had come to mark the renewal of God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, where God had revealed the Law with dramatic fiery signs and wonders. Synagogue scripture readings for the first day of Shavuot include the Sinai story in Exodus 19 and the vision of God's fiery throne chariot in Ezekiel 1; Jews also read the book of Ruth that celebrates faithfulness to the Torah and looks forward to the coming of the Messiah.

These texts about heavenly revelation begin to help us understand the context for our story from Acts. God's Holy Spirit arrives with the sound of a rushing wind and what look like tongues of fire. As a busy crowd of migrants and pilgrims from around the empire are streaming past the house, they hear themselves addressed in their own languages by a bunch of uncouth country bumpkins! Have these people taken the festival spirit a bit too enthusiastically and started the day with a champagne breakfast? If so, they certainly don't have the excuse of celebrating the success of their favourite football team!

Well, maybe not. Simon Peter, the uneducated spokesmen of the disciples, gets up to make his first speech as an apostle – his first *ever* public speech, as far as we can tell. And it's quite a cracker! The coming of the Spirit has certainly empowered Peter in unexpected ways! The miracle of

languages shows how the Spirit empowers ordinary followers of Jesus to reach the world in extraordinary ways.

“What you’re seeing here,” Peter says, “is ancient prophecy becoming reality in front of your eyes.” The prophet Joel promised that when God comes to rescue Israel he will be pouring out his Spirit on all his people, young and old, men and women. What’s happened now, says Peter, is exactly that: God’s Messiah, raised and exalted, is pouring out his promised Holy Spirit on all God’s people.

But what might this actually mean? The Holy Spirit is at the heart of our faith but also poorly understood. In our few minutes here this morning I’d like to single out just three misunderstandings of the Holy Spirit’s coming that I think would be good to take away and ponder.

So **First**, the Holy Spirit is not some sort of outlandish spook. To be honest, the way Christians talk about the Spirit sometimes sounds that way to outsiders. And it hardly helps that the Book of Common Prayer and the old King James Bible always talk about the Holy *Ghost*! What could this possibly mean? Are we talking about a person or a thing? Is this something to do with Halloween or Ghostbusters?

No, the Spirit’s work is to testify to Jesus and guide us into all truth, as our Gospel reading puts it. True, sometimes the Spirit makes that happen in dramatic ways that signal God coming with power to fulfill his promise, as the disciples found at Pentecost. The rush of wind and fire reminds us of the stories of God’s coming to Mount Sinai, with its thunder, smoke and lightning; and of the earthquake, wind and fire – but also the “still small voice” – which the prophet Elijah encountered when he went there. Pentecost is the festival of revelation. God comes among his people to share with us the presence of his Son Jesus through his faithful empowering presence, his Spirit.

Notice that the story happens *on the first day of the week*. That’s also important: it’s a Sunday. Pentecost Sunday completes the revelation of who God is – as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Father created light on the first day of the week; and he raised God the Son from the dead on the first day of the week. And now the Son pours out God the Holy Spirit on the first day of the week.

The Spirit is not some exotic spook, but the presence of the power of God. And the story of the book of Acts shows that pretty soon, that Pentecost reality also empowers the perfectly ordinary aspects of the Christian community’s life and mission together.

**Secondly**, the Holy Spirit is not an optional extra, not an add-on for super-important or super-spiritual people. The Spirit came not just for the Apostles but for lots of others. If you keep reading in the Book of Acts, it’s very clear that the Holy Spirit is poured out on all believers – on quite ordinary folk, not just the wealthy but the poor, not just the old but the young, not only Jews

but Gentiles, not just the free but slaves and prisoners. The Spirit is God's gracious and generous gift that always accompanies faith in Jesus wherever it goes.

But **thirdly**, and perhaps most importantly, what is the Spirit actually *for*? Many Christians in many churches don't quite know what to do with his promise. Isn't it enough to believe in God and Jesus? Maybe the Spirit is just for super-emotional charismatics, or a piece of abstract theological furniture, maybe a necessary bit of speculation so we can have the Trinity in the Creed?

No: the Spirit is what makes faith work, what charges up its battery and makes it go. All who belong to Christ are promised God's Spirit as our birthright, poured out into our hearts to help us hear and receive the gospel, to make Christ real to us, to empower us in the life he has promised us.

The Holy Spirit makes Christian life possible. He enters our story like the rushing wind and fire, as the seal and confirmation of our relationship with God, poured out into our hearts as his refreshing and abundant love. The Spirit makes our lives joyful and fruitful in relationship to God, whether the weather of our circumstances is foul or fine. Because it's the Spirit's job to bear witness to Jesus, our lives too can bear witness to Jesus.

The Creed calls the Holy Spirit "The Lord and Giver of Life". Here is the difference between just knowing certain facts *about* God or Jesus, and knowing his presence with us. At Pentecost the one who has conquered death whispers into our hearts through the Spirit, "I give everything I am to make you free. I promise to carry you to the inexpressible joy of heaven. I have called you by name. I love you. You are mine forever."

This Lord and Giver of Life *welcomes* all of us as we are – but he also leaves none of us unchanged as we are. The Spirit of Holiness *transforms* us into the people of holiness that we are called to be, healing and reordering our disordered affections and priorities.

Notice how in this story the gift of Pentecost turns a band of frightened followers into joyful witnesses to people from around the world. A few chapters later in Acts, Luke says simply, "The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (13.52). Those two things belong together.

So the Holy Spirit is not an exotic spook, but God's gift of himself. The Spirit is not an optional extra for the super-spiritual, but is promised and poured out on *all* God's people. And the Holy Spirit makes the love of God real and present to us and fills us with his power and his love. Not back in the day, once upon a time, but here and now, in your life and in mine.

*Come, Holy Spirit, our Advocate! Fill the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle in us the fire of your Love. AMEN*