

## Pentecost Sermon 2020

I have to confess to really not enjoying preaching on the Feast of Pentecost. Had it not been that I am currently the only person allowed in the building, I'd have engineered things so that one of the others was up here this morning.

I don't like preaching on Pentecost because every year part of me thinks .... All you're doing is stringing a lot of words together to get round the fact, that your life, and your church's life, looks nothing like what you've just heard described. Acts Chapter Two: that's what Christianity should be like – all fire and wind, dreams and visions, filled with energy and vigour, all set to convert the world. And we're fairly obviously *not*. I'm certainly not.

Indeed, we are so not that when someone – usually a very confident, clear someone - asks me the simple question: 'so where is God at work in your life? What's the Holy Spirit doing in you, or in the parish?' I get rather tongue-tied and start to stutter a bit. Where's the Holy Spirit? I look at Acts 2, and I look at me, and I look at us, and I don't really know. I think we might have missed Him.

You might think that is a rather devastating admission for a vicar, and in some ways it is. But actually, it's not so much an admission as a confusion. A confusion which we get into by reading Acts 2 in isolation and forgetting what the rest of the Bible says about the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2, you see, emphasises what might be called the *spectacular* side of the Spirit – tongues of flame, people suddenly speaking different languages, the very obvious eruption of God into the world.

Fine, but if that's all you read, then you forget that much of the Spirit's activity is *unspectacular*. In Genesis 1, we read that human beings come alive when God takes dust breathes his Spirit into it. Understand that: you only exist, at all, because you are God-breathed. Spirit-filled. You need the Spirit just like a light bulb needs the electric current flowing through it. If you did not have the Spirit, right now, you'd go back into dust. How do you know the Holy Spirit is at work within you? Because you're alive: it is as simple and basic as that.

But there is more to say. God breathed life into us not just to give physical existence, says the Bible, but to produce a certain *kind* of life. Your life can be more or less full of the Spirit, more or less what God was trying to do when he made you. St. Paul gives one of the classic statements of this, when he talks about 'the fruits of the Spirit.' What was God always trying to do in human beings? What did he want? Paul summarises: the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Which means that the answer to the question 'where is the Holy Spirit at work in your life' is to look, honestly, at your life and say: OK – where am I becoming a person of all these things? It's not a matter of looking for spectacular, extraordinary things. You don't have to speak in tongues or see visions or do anything else exotic. It's *ordinary* things – patience, kindness, generosity – that the Spirit is about. Is your life becoming more like that? Well, that's how you know the Spirit is at work. Not the spectacular, but the straightforward.

And all that, incidentally, is in its own way a good deal more extraordinary than you might think. There are all sorts of things in our world and in our own psyches which make the achievement of love, joy, peace and the rest of them a very tall order indeed. For our lives to be really, steadily, shaping into what Paul describes – well, that really is extraordinary. Miraculous, even. This is not what human nature is like. If you doubt that, watch the news more closely, or even just look soberly at all the dynamics of your own family life, of your own individual heart. Love, joy, peace. Patience, Kindness, Generosity. Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control. Can you honestly say that this who we are? Love, joy and peace are *hard*. Indeed, left to our own devices, seemingly impossible.

But the Gospel, of course, is that we are *not* left to our own devices. Into the middle of ruined human nature, into a world which had done all it could to choke the Spirit, God sent his Son. He sent Jesus, in whom we see all the fruits of the Spirit grown in their fullness, grown in abundance. And then, most remarkably of all, in that Gospel passage from John, we see the Son breathing the Spirit onto his followers. *He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'*. It is the kiss of life: he is breathing into their wrecked human nature – our wrecked human nature – his own perfect life. His love, his joy, his peace; all the fruits of the Spirit – all breathed into us. His life, becoming the deepest swell of ours. Bearing us up on its rising tide.

So don't worry too much, then, if when you look at the church you don't see tongues of fire on people's heads or don't hear them speaking in strange languages. *Do* worry, though, if you don't see people growing in love, joy, peace, patience and so on. Not that the church will ever be perfect, of course, not this side of the Kingdom. We understand that - though interestingly, some in the early church did not. They really did find it inconceivable that Christians could sin, with this new life breathing within them. Now they lost that argument in the early Church, and collectively we soon came to understand that sin and failure are always going to be part of Christian life. Nevertheless a big part of their insight was right: the Gospel really is about changed lives. It will not be straightforward, there will be all sorts of disasters in our personal and community life – but if through it all we cannot say, in the end, that we are growing in the fruits of the Spirit well, then, yes – that is a serious problem for a Church.

One last thought. I've spent most of this sermon saying that our focus should not be on the spectacular but on the ordinary, less tongues of fire and more love, joy, peace. Quite right. Nevertheless, there's a counterpoint and a good one. The risk of my emphasis is that it comes to seem all about *effort* – yet another sermon about trying a bit harder. I *will* be gentle, I *will* be patient. Now, I'm all for effort, but the Gospel says – and Acts 2 makes very clear – that *effort* isn't really what it's all about. The disciples don't try very, very hard to be better disciples, and then the Spirit blows. No, the Spirit blows, and their lives change. Gift comes before effort: if you wanted a four word summary of the Gospel, I've heard worse. Gift comes before effort.

Which means that if there is to be effort at anything, it needs to be at prayer. *Not* because if you pray really, really hard God might answer, might give you the gift. That would once again make things about you and what you're doing. No, there's a paradox here. What we have to try hard at is above all a sort of passiveness – a *not doing* – a wanting and waiting for what *God* is going to do. He does not need to be impressed by you, or cajoled by you, before He will act. He *does* need you to be open enough, still enough, hungry enough to pour Himself into. Without this, nothing happens – just our effort, our egos, our exhaustion.

In many ways, lockdown – and, God willing, the approaching end of lockdown – offers us a chance to re-evaluate what the priorities of our lives are. Our priorities as individuals, our priorities as a Church. We know what our Creator is interested in; we know what life is really about: love, joy, peace, the beautiful fruits of the Spirit. We know how those things will happen: through holding ourselves open to the risen Jesus breathing them within us. We know these things. Will we reshape our lives, and our life together, to make them our top priority? What would that look like? That's what we need to answer in the months ahead.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people.