

Pentecost 2018

I confess to not really looking forward to the feast of Pentecost, and certainly not to preaching on it. Other vicars dread Trinity Sunday, next week, because they think the Trinity is difficult and intellectual and complicated. Me, I shy away from Pentecost. It makes me feel uncomfortable. It makes me feel I'm not very Christian at all.

So what's the problem with Pentecost? It's all this language of explosive power, of wind and flame, of exuberance and enthusiasm – of the apostles suddenly speaking in tongues, and sharing all that they had, and of thousands flocking to join them. It's that sense of an explosion of energy, of God simply erupting in the disciples in a way that none could question, none could doubt.

And that makes me uncomfortable because my life just isn't like that, and in fairness to me, I guess *most* of the Church of England isn't like that. Because my kind of Christianity is rather sensible. Rather moderate, tame. I pray, a bit, in carefully measured chunks of time. I give, a bit, agonising as to whether it should be a few pounds extra here or there. I worship, a bit – but it had better be over within a reasonable time, and not be too emotional. If any of you started speaking in tongues, I won't quite know what to do with myself. And I love, a very little bit. My religion – our religion? – is really rather careful. 'Rather' is one of its typical words: let's not be *too* committed, not *too* over-the-top. It is very, very Anglican. One of the reasons we kicked the Methodists out in the eighteenth century was because they were so unAnglican, so 'enthusiastic' – in those days, that was a recognised insult. Bishop Butler, one of the great Anglican leaders, said to John Wesley, 'Sir, your pretending to extraordinary gifts and revelations of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing.'

Well, there's a lot which is good about Anglicanism, about our kind of religion, but in the light of Acts 2 there's a serious, serious problem. Acts 2 is full of exuberance, wildness, confidence. It is anything but sensible. It is wildly enthusiastic – and remember by the way that the root meaning of enthusiastic is simply, 'breathed in by God'. Nobody would look at us and say, 'they must be drunk'. We are *way* too sensible. Well, the feast of Pentecost is here to remind us that that's really not good enough. Being Christian is not about being sensible. There must be *something* which is mad, out of control – which says to the world that something bigger than the world is here.

That doesn't, by the way, mean that we all have to start speaking in tongues. It might be good if we did *sometimes*. But St. Paul is fairly cool about tongues: he realises it is the sort of thing that people obsess about but what really counts, he urges, is what helps build up the church. He's not interested in what you might call divine 'special effects', the showy and spectacular – except insofar as those things can help the more prosaic business of making Christians, and making Christians love each other and the world. And so, actually, is St. Luke: it's worth remembering that the point of the gift of tongues in Acts 2 is that people are allowed to understand each other. They had been cut off by the barrier of language; now that barrier comes crashing down. And the story of Acts is how other barriers go on crashing down: race, religion, sex, class, death – none of these things will stand against the Spirit. The Spirit will make friends, communion, where once people were cut off: that's the whole point of his gifts.

So there are two clues as to what a Spirit-filled life, or a Spirit-filled church, should look like.

Number one: In some ways, it should look exuberant, excessive. It should do some things at which the world can only look bewildered and say, 'they must be drunk.'

Number two: Those excesses must be about smashing down the barriers between people, making friends where there were none, celebrating communion.

What would that look like, here? Now please understand, I'm far too Anglican, and far too sinful to actually *do* any of these things. I think they might well be the sort of thing God wants, but I'm a bit of a coward, so need a church to help me to do it. But what about thoughts like this?

First, money. Some us, not all of us by any means, are lucky enough to have savings. Some have hundreds, some might even have thousands. What if, instead of debating whether we give £5 a week or £10 towards the Kingdom of God, we thought instead in terms of hundreds and thousands? Once upon a time, when the church was young, the mainstream teaching was this: 'whatever you have, that you do not need, you are stealing from the poor.' 'Whatever you have, that you do not need, you are stealing from the poor.' I find those words staggeringly challenging. I'm not ready to live my life by what they mean. But what if together we lived just a bit more like it? Not necessarily in terms of just giving all our money away – though Jesus give us a sharp dig to do just that – but how about all of us supporting the Watford Credit union, making small loans for no profit to those in need around this area? What if loan sharks and pay day loans companies knew there simply was no business around here, because the church looked after people? That would be pretty amazing. That would be Pentecost.

Or we could think of Megan Rice. She's a Christian, well into her eighties, and she has only recently come out of prison in Tennessee. She served two years for the crime of trespass and vandalism on a nuclear weapons facility. It was quite embarrassing for the US, really, because it was meant to be one of the most secure sites in the country, where they make warheads for the missiles. At 83 years old, Megan cut through the wire, got to the components and poured blood over them. We can't defend ourselves by threatening to kill millions, she said. And I'm happy to go to jail to stop it, she said. What kind of 83-year-old does that? The mad, pentecostally drunk, kind.

Megan, by the way, is a nun. What if one of our young people said they wanted to be one – to lay aside ambition, sexual fulfilment, even their family, to dedicate their lives to prayer and service? That's a decision the world thinks is mad. Many in the church think it is mad, sometimes even suspicious. When did you last hear someone talk about how good a thing religious celibacy is? I can't say I'd be thrilled if in twenty years' time that's the path Sam and Ben wanted to choose. Yet Jesus was celibate, Paul was celibate. They gave up comfort, wealth, family, normality of every sort. They were Pentecostal in their excess. The church used to value vocations like that, to pray for them, to rejoice when they happened. Why don't we? What if we started? That might be Pentecost.

I don't like preaching on Pentecost mostly because it is simply too darn challenging. Let's pray for each other, as individuals and as a church, that this year God can get to breathe his Spirit through us just a little more.

Peter Waddell