

The Spirit Comes

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them!

Wow! The Holy Spirit was poured out on all believers! Amazing things happened!

Is that your experience of the Holy Spirit? The passion, the Spirit flowing, supernatural things happening?

Or is your experience not quite like that? Or perhaps not like that at all?

The truth is that the Holy Spirit comes to us all differently, and the Holy Spirit moves us all differently, and the Holy Spirit gives us all different gifts. But it is the one Spirit who gives them.

And we are blessed with a wide range of traditions and denominations and congregations and services and styles of worship. But it is the one church. It is the one body of Christ.

We have in our bible readings today two accounts of the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples. We had the reading from Acts with all the things we typically associate with Pentecost: The sound like the rush of a violent wind, tongues of fire, and the disciples speaking in other languages. We read of the crowd of devout Jews being bewildered at this. They were amazed and astonished. It was even suggested that they may well have been drunk.

In Acts we have the account of the Holy Spirit coming on believers, with noise and fire and passion and speaking in tongues. And some people today, some churches, will say, “Yes! that’s our experience of receiving the Holy Spirit!”

Our gospel reading gives us quite a different account of the coming of the Holy Spirit, though. John 20 tells us that the risen Jesus has appeared to his disciples, and then “he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”.

He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.

No noise. No tongues of fire. No speaking in other languages. None of the drama we usually associate with Pentecost.

A breath from Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit. That’s all. If you’ve been coming to church for a while you might remember that the Greek word ‘Pneuma’ is used for breath, wind and spirit – and breath, wind and spirit are all tied together in Pentecost.

In the gospel reading, we see the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples – Jesus said to them “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven”

Which is better, do you think? The gift of speaking in tongues, or the power to forgive sins?

I don’t think there’s a right answer. Because we’re called to share the gospel and that’s what the disciples were doing at that first Pentecost: Speaking in languages isn’t just a neat party trick, - it has a clear purpose Acts 2:11 “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own

tongues!”. We need to communicate with people to share the good news of Jesus too, but we’re also called to forgive sins (as we pray so often in the Lord’s prayer: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us).

The important thing, though, is that though the gifts are different, the giver, the Holy Spirit is the same. There’s a wonderful passage in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1 Co 12:4-6) “Now there are varieties of gifts,” he says “but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”

So: there are indeed many gifts, but they all have the same source. There are indeed many ways to serve, but ultimately, they all serve the same Lord, and indeed many things to do, but we are able to do any of them only because of God’s grace.

In fact, there are many, many gifts that we receive from the Holy Spirit – John in his gospel tells us of the power to forgive sins, Luke in Acts tells us about the ability to speak other languages, and later in 1 Corinthians, Paul, gives us a list of a whole lot more: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophesying, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. The implication is that that’s not even a comprehensive list.

But Paul is clear when he writes about all those gifts: they are all activated by one Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Friends, the Spirit comes to all of us in different ways, and brings us different gifts. And we are all different, and we all have different gifts, different abilities and different preferences, but we are all loved by God, we are all saved by Jesus’ death and resurrection, and we are all called to follow him, and to use our gifts – the gifts that each of us receive through the Holy Spirit – to share the good news and grow God’s kingdom.

My favourite story of receiving the Holy Spirit isn’t Jesus breathing on his disciples, and it isn’t the noise and fire of Pentecost, in fact it isn’t even in the bible – it’s the story of John Wesley. It’s particularly appropriate to remember it today, because today is Aldersgate day:

Exactly 288 years ago today, on May 24, 1738, at a meeting in Aldersgate Street in London, John Wesley, who was, at that time, a failed missionary, heard a reading of Martin Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans, and as he listened, he realised what God’s grace in Christ truly meant. It was his conversion experience – he later said, “I felt my heart strangely warmed”. His experience of receiving the Holy Spirit wasn’t all noise and fire, it wasn’t even a gentle breath – he simply felt his heart being strangely warmed.

John Wesley received gifts of discernment and knowledge and wisdom and many more, and he used them: He took the gospel to the people – he preached in churches, in the countryside, in halls, houses and private chapels.

He spoke, I guess, in other languages, but not foreign languages: Instead, he spoke in the language of the working classes, the language of the servants, the language of the poor, but most of all, he spoke in the language of those who needed to hear the good news.

And that all began with his heart being strangely warmed.

So today, on this Pentecost Sunday, is your heart warmed by the Holy Spirit?

Indeed, as a congregation here at St Ives, is our collective heart warmed by the Holy Spirit?

Does the fire of God, the fire of Pentecost, burn within us, individually and collectively?

Because it is so easy to let the fire dwindle or even die.

It's easy to go through the motions of being a Christian, and of being a member of a church, but without feeling the passion, without rekindling the fire of the Holy Spirit within us.

As Christians, as believers we are called to love. We're called to love God, and we're called to love one another.

We are called to be happy with the work God has done in our lives, and we're called to want to learn and know more about Jesus.

And of course, we're called to tell others about Jesus and what he means to us.

But if we don't accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit, if we don't let the Holy Spirit warm our hearts or work within us, then we can't do any of those things.

We can certainly be an organisation which does good things, and has a good budget, and is part of the community and is run effectively and efficiently. We can certainly be all of those things, but without the Holy Spirit warming our hearts and the Holy Spirit inspiring us and equipping us and empowering us – we're not really the church.

The Holy Spirit is the one who makes us the church. The Holy Spirit is the one who can bring change in our lives. The Holy Spirit is here for each one of us.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit can be confronting to us – because Jesus tells us (John 16:8-9), that the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of our sin, and who speaks God's truth to us.

The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to God's word, and changes our hearts, attitudes, and actions.

But it is also the Holy Spirit who produces in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - which Paul calls the fruit of the spirit and are the signs of a Christian life (Galatians. 5:22-23).

After his resurrection, and immediately before Jesus ascended, he told his disciples (Acts 1:8), "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Holy Spirit gave them power to do just that – and the Holy Spirit gives us power to do just that, as well.

Sometimes we fear having a personal experience with the Holy Spirit. Or we're worried because our experience of the Holy Spirit isn't the same as others' experience.

And instead of living a Spirit filled life, and having our hearts warmed and experiencing the power of God, we go through the motions. We do what we've always done. We do what others expect us to do. We become afraid of the power of the Spirit.

When we read the beginning of the book of Acts, we find that the disciples were afraid.

Pentecost is literally fifty days after Passover, and it was seven weeks since the Jesus had been crucified and an awful lot of things had happened in that time:

The greatest thing was Jesus rising from the dead. Three days after he was placed in a borrowed tomb, it was empty.

Three days after the disciples had given up hope; in Jesus' resurrection, hope had been given back to them.

After his resurrection Jesus appeared to his friends, and he even made them breakfast on the beach at Galilee.

Then on top of a mountain, he told them that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit, and that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Then ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven in front of his followers, they were gathered in a room in Jerusalem, and they are doing what Jesus had told them to do - they were waiting and they were gathered together to celebrate the Jewish festival of Shavuot – when the Jewish people celebrated the first-fruits of the wheat harvest, and remembered the giving of the Torah – the law – to the Jewish people.

Acts 2:1 tells us, on the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place.

And then the Holy Spirit came to them.

Without the Holy Spirit, Peter and the rest of the disciples wouldn't have had the courage to come out of that place and share the good news of Jesus.

Their belief in the risen Christ, the Son of God, gave them the gift of salvation and of everlasting life with God, but power came to them through the Holy Spirit.

Later, in Chapter 2 of Acts, Peter teaches clearly on who receives the Holy Spirit, he says "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)."

If we have turned from the ways of the world, and turned to Jesus, then we have the Holy Spirit living within us.

The Spirit works in different ways: Sometimes, instantly in a powerful way, or sometimes slowly, in a gradual way.

God's desire for us is that we are in a living relationship with him, that we would be like Jesus, and that we can help others into a relationship with God too.

It's daunting work, but we need to always remember we don't do it alone, and we don't do it by our own power - it's work we are equipped and empowered to do by the Holy Spirit, whether we know the Spirit by the noise and fire, the gentle breath, or by our hearts being strangely warmed.

Amen.