

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday

The Bishop's Palace, Wells

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Before moving to Wells I recorded a sermon from my Chapel in the Bishop's Palace and that has now been made available to all the parishes of the diocese. This is the text of what I said and I am delighted to send you greetings in the Lord and my warm best wishes and prayers. I am already looking forward to all that lies ahead and getting to meet many of you in the weeks and months to come.

Before moving into the diocese I made a number of visits for various meetings and began to bring some things with me. One thing which I brought with me in advance of our move was a crosier. It was made for me by a retired priest who I knew in Portsmouth diocese. He fashioned the shepherd's crook out of yew from the churchyard where he worships and asked me whether I had a stick to which it could be attached. I told him I had just the thing. The staff is made from a stick that I used when I made a bonfire. I delight in a good bonfire, especially one that burns for several days, but bonfires need prodding and stirring from time to time to keep them burning. We are a bit like that in our own Christian lives. We need God, the Holy Spirit to continually stir us up, so that our faith burns brightly for others to see. On Pentecost Sunday I am reminded what Paul wrote to Timothy: 'I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.' (2 Timothy 1:6 - 7)

And as I assume my new responsibilities as Bishop, I am aware that I shall need the leading and guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, each and every day. In order that I may live for Christ and serve him faithfully, I will need the love, power and self-control that only the Spirit can give.

The New Testament reading for Pentecost Sunday, which will have been read in many churches, is from the Book of Acts. It describes the coming of the Holy Spirit in vivid and apocalyptic images. Throughout the Old Testament fire is a sign of judgement and wind is a sign of power and life. The Spirit fills the house where the disciples have gathered, the Spirit fills the disciples and the Spirit fills their lives - so much so that some people in the crowd think the disciples are filled with new wine.

But Peter stands up and explains to the crowd that they are not drunk - nine o'clock in the morning is too early for a cocktail party - this is the promised Holy Spirit of God.

We read that the crowd are bewildered and utterly amazed, and understandably so, as they hear the Word spoken to them in their own languages. We hear of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cappodocians, Phrygians and Pamphylians and all the rest - a daunting list which means that nobody wants to be asked to read the lesson on Pentecost Sunday! But what this tells us is that the whole world is present at Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit is for all people.

Whilst we read that the crowd are bewildered and utterly amazed, we are not told what the disciples felt like. I am sure they were equally bewildered and amazed to find themselves on the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Only a few days previously they had been locked away in an upper room for fear of the authorities. At the Last Supper Jesus

had promised his disciples that when he returned to the Father he would send them the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and now the Spirit has come. The Spirit gives to those first disciples a confidence and a message of joy which they cannot contain or keep to themselves. For the Spirit is not given for them alone, but in order that the world might know that Jesus is risen and, as Peter says in his Pentecost sermon, so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” The experience the disciples had must have been exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

It is the same for us today. To invoke or invite the Spirit into our lives is not to ask for a gentle nudge. It is asking Him to stir up the fire within us, so that we may blaze with the love, joy and peace of Christ. This winter Somerset suffered terrible flooding which caused real and lasting problems for whole communities. I have already met with some of those who had to live through those severe difficulties and I have been amazed and delighted by many of the stories I have heard about the neighbourliness, support and care which people have given and received. It is clear that the churches were at the very heart of all the good things which were happening.

But, as many of you experienced during that time, floods can bring with them surging, churning and untameable waters. Wind, water and fire are not tame images. So when we ask the Spirit to fill us and burn within us, we are asking that we may be stirred up and made less comfortable. The experience of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, caused the crowd to be bewildered and utterly amazed. They were disturbed by what they experienced.

I am sure the hymn ‘Shine, Jesus, Shine’ is familiar to most of you. It invites us to sing these words:

“Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father’s glory;
Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy;
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.”

That hymn takes us to the very heart, meaning and joy of Pentecost. It challenges us to let the wind and fire of the Spirit sweep through our lives, our minds, our imagination, our speech, so that we become people whose hearts are on fire with the love of God. Like the first disciples we too should find this to be both exhilarating and terrifying. The power, presence and peace which transformed the lives of the first disciples made them a force to be reckoned with across the whole known world.

And today, right across the diocese and indeed across the whole world, as we open ourselves to the same Spirit we are asking that the Lord will lead us to do new things, in His name, across the lives of the churches and communities we serve.

The services of Morning and Evening Prayer for Pentecost open with these words:

‘Send your Holy Spirit upon us and clothe us with power from on high. Alleluia’.

So as we celebrate Pentecost may that be the prayer of our hearts. ‘Lord, send your Holy Spirit upon us and clothe us with power from on high. For your glory’s sake.’ Amen

+Peter Bath and Wells