

Trinity 5
Sunday 19th July 2020
Five Events that Shaped Christianity – Week 6
Event 5. Pentecost – The Promise



Pentecost, Jennifer Allison

Readings:

Acts 2:1-17, 37-42

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

"In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Reflection

So, to our final event. And though we could say that every one of these 5 events was world changing, it was only with this one that the world began to sit up and take notice. Most of the Gospel focusses on Judea and Judeans, Galilee and Galileans; foreigners have only slightly impinged on our story before, most notably with the visit of the magi. But God's immaculate timing meant that the witnesses to this event came from the Jewish diaspora in all three known continents – Europe, Africa and Asia, the "known world" – and they were assembled in Jerusalem for the festival. Probably to their own amazement, three thousand of them find themselves being baptised as followers of Jesus. In the next few weeks these newly baptised travellers would return home and take the news of Jesus and his doings across those three continents. This is not just a religious event but a seismic shift in world history

What happened?

Apart from brief meetings with the risen Jesus, since the crucifixion, the disciples have been locked in the upper room – and locked in a world of wonder and bewilderment, and perhaps some frustration. Now, like a lightning strike, comes a morning of intensity and drama. And there is an amazing release of energy that cannot be contained. The only words that Luke can think of to use to describe it are wind and fire – two uncontrollable elements. No longer able to restrain themselves, the disciples take their excitement out onto the street where the commotion attracts a crowd. And then there is the miracle of tongues. Peter preaches – and everyone understands. It is difficult for us to understand what exactly was going on. But the key to the event is that the disciples now know what they have to do – and have the energy to do it. Nothing would stop them now.

What does it mean?

Now that he has arrived, what do we make of the Holy Spirit? What does he make of us, his new charges? He has many missions and one of them is to present Christ in a new way, which was why Mary Magdalene was not allowed to hold on to him in his new resurrection form, enlivened by the Spirit. Jesus would now be present to all who wanted him through that same Spirit – and another of the Spirit’s tasks was to point people towards Jesus, to bring him into their lives so that he might dwell in them and they in him. The Spirit was also there to empower the life and mission of the Church. The Jesus movement which became the Church would be powerless without the Spirit. Pentecost is not just about having wonderful feelings but about the energy produced, and about the gifts the Spirit gives us, spread across the church. Sometimes we may covet gifts we have not got, but we do have all the gifts we need and which we can put to use to fulfil our potential.

All this is amazing enough, but most wonderful of all is that **everything** is transformed by the coming of the Spirit. Without him, God is distant and Jesus just a character from history, the Gospel a dead letter and the Church a meaningless organization. With him we see a whole new cosmos. It doesn’t always feel that way, but our Christian faith tells us that God’s kingdom is unstoppable. For the first time the Church has met this third person of the Trinity, who till now has been rather mysterious; but now we know more of what he is capable of. He was the agent of creation; his power raised Jesus; and he breathed new life into the disciples. The scale of his activity is tremendous and takes in every aspect of life. But what does that mean for our discipleship today? ...

What does it mean for us now?

The coming of the Spirit brings us many benefits. Just as for those first witnesses at Pentecost, when we see the Spirit at work it is an exhilarating experience. He continues to energise God’s people as he energised the prophets, the disciples and Jesus himself - “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...” (Luke 4:18) He makes that same potential available to all of us as we open ourselves up to his power and energy. He fills us with life, again the same life he gave to Jesus, if we are open to him. Isn’t that amazing? We have access to everything the Spirit gave to Jesus! As with the other persons of the Trinity, we can encounter the Spirit through prayer, and we see his work in his fruits. How do we get the fruit? Just like any other fruit. They grow out of the sap – and the sap is the Spirit within us. Though his work is extraordinary, it should also be normal for us and not a freak occurrence in our lives – not if he abides in us. Once he is accepted into our lives, his sap will continue to rise within us, and fruit will follow as part of a natural process.

And the Spirit enables us to cope with whatever life throws at us. We all have crises and can probably assume that all the people we meet are the same; everyone carries some burden. God did not say that we would not have problems, but he promised that we would not be overcome. The Spirit may not always be able to rescue us from our own folly, but God’s presence gives us resilience and that gives us hope.

And finally, the goal of all Christians is to be more like Christ and the Spirit is a superb teacher. But being Christlike is a huge challenge and to make it happen for each of us the Spirit employs all the powers listed here. But if we give him free rein in our lives, he will succeed. However “set” our character is, he **can** transform it.

It is the Spirit who gives us our life. (John 6:63) And who gives us all the gifts we need to make that life abundant and fruitful.

Amen

Prayers

Today's Collect

Merciful God,
you have prepared for those who love you
such good things as pass our understanding:
pour into our hearts such love toward you
that we, loving you in all things and above all things,
may obtain your promises,
which exceed all that we can desire;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

A Prayer to experience the Spirit of Pentecost in our own lives.

Spirit of life,
Fill our emptiness with your fullness.
Spirit of power,
Stir our hearts afresh.
Spirit of love,
Touch us, and through us, our neighbour.
Spirit of Creativity,
Enable and empower the gifts you have given.
Spirit of Eternity,
Draw us ever deeper into your Kingdom.
Amen

Prayer for the end of the virus

Even as, here in the UK, we begin to see glimmers of hope that the crisis is ending, worldwide the virus continues to have a devastating effect. SECAM, the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar, has suggested the following prayer for all those affected by the coronavirus:

Almighty and merciful Father, who show your love to all your creation.
We come before you asking for a quick control of the Coronavirus currently ravaging our world.
Hear graciously the prayers we make for those affected by the virus in various parts of the world.
Grant healing to the sick, eternal life to the dead and consolation to the bereaved families.
We pray that an effective medicine to combat the sickness be speedily found.
We pray for the relevant governments and health authorities that they take appropriate steps for the good of the people.
Look upon us in your mercy and forgive us our failings.
Amen.

Blessing

May the Spirit, who hovered over the waters when the world was created, breathe into you the life he gives.

May the Spirit, who overshadowed the Virgin when the eternal Son came among us,
Make you obedient in the service of the Lord.

May the Spirit, who set the Church on fire upon the Day of Pentecost,
bring the world alive with the love of the risen Christ.

And the blessing of God Almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

be among you and remain with you always.

Amen