

Pentecost Sermon – Bishop Jonathan Gibbs 31st May 2020

Bible Reading: Acts 2: 1 – 21

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's very good to be with you as we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost and the coming of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Did you know that the first Christians went into lockdown? In fact, not once but twice, in the first days and weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection.

The first time was immediately after the crucifixion. John 20 Verse 19 tells us that "the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews."

This was a lockdown based on fear. It was about protecting themselves from harm.

The second time was between the Ascension of Jesus and the day of Pentecost. This was rather different, because Jesus had actually told them to stay where they were and to wait for the gift he would send them – the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So when the day of Pentecost came, as we read in Acts 2 Verse 1, "they were all together in one place".

This was a very different kind of lockdown, based not on fear but on hope and anticipation. They were waiting expectantly for the gift that Jesus had promised.

What I want to talk about today is the transition that the disciples went through during these days, moving from being paralysed by fear to looking forward with hope and expectation, and then being sent out in God's mission to the world.

The disciples' fear had been transformed into hope by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his meetings with the disciples between Easter and the Ascension.

They were of course still being watched by the Jewish authorities; they still faced possible arrest for being associated with a crucified criminal. But they were no longer paralysed by their fear, because they had met Jesus and knew he had risen from the dead.

And now they were waiting for the start of a new phase – the beginning of a new adventure – as they prepared to move out of 'lockdown' and to be sent out, as Jesus had promised, to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and to the ends of the earth.

What is important for us to see are the three stages that were part of this process, beginning with that time between the Ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost itself.

Acts 1 Verse 14 tells us that, "they all joined together constantly in prayer".

They didn't just sit there passively waiting; they devoted themselves to prayer, expressing their dependency on God and seeking his guidance and strength both for now and for what lay ahead.

And this is crucially important for us as well. This time of lockdown, of waiting, isn't just something to endure passively – and if we do that, it will feel much worse anyway. No, it is a time to use for seeking God's guidance and strength, both for now and for what lies ahead. It is a time to be praying above all for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Then we come to the Day of Pentecost itself, and the remarkable events that took place that day.

The Holy Spirit came with the sound of a violent wind and what looked like tongues of fire rested on them. They started speaking in other languages and praising the amazing things that God had done.

All this noise and commotion drew people's attention – word got round and a crowd quickly gathered, made up of people who had maybe heard about Jesus, but who were not part of the group of the disciples.

Isn't that something like what many of us are seeing at the moment? I am hearing about new people tuning in and watching our on-line worship, or listening to our recorded services, or reading and joining in with the printed material we are sending out – people from the wider community and sometimes even on the other side of the world!

It's maybe not as dramatic as what happened at Pentecost – but people do seem to be drawn by our worship and praise and interested to see and hear what is going on.

And then thirdly and very importantly Peter steps up to explain what is going on by proclaiming what God has done through Jesus and by inviting people to become part of what God is doing.

And that also needs to be part of what we are doing – it's great to have people watching and listening – but we also need to explain why we are excited about what God has done in Jesus and to invite people to become part of it for themselves.

So, three stages, three elements to what was going on at Pentecost. Three things that also need to be part of the Church's life today – and especially at this time. Prayer – especially for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Praise – celebrating what God has done and is doing through Jesus. Proclamation – explaining the good news about Jesus and inviting people to join with him for themselves.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, we need to remember the purpose behind all of this. It was not just about growing the Church – expanding the community of disciples. It was about far more than that. It was about God's plan to create a whole new humanity, drawing together people of every tribe and language and nation. It was about inviting all people to be part of his new kingdom of compassion, and justice and peace. It was that vision that excited and fired countless people to join the Christian community as the message of the gospel spread out across the whole ancient world.

It is that same message that has the power to catch people's imaginations today – and that they need and want to hear at this time of uncertainty and fear. And they need to hear it from you and me, in whatever ways we can communicate it to them.

Now is the time to prepare for the future: to pray, to praise, to proclaim.

Remembering the purpose of it all – which is to invite people to join in with God's great plan to create a new humanity and a new kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

I pray that in the coming days we will be ready and willing to play our part in fulfilling the wonderful purposes of God, empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.