

Pentecost – When the Spirit Comes

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file if you wish to hear it read instead of reading it yourself.

The reading for today's address can be found in Acts 2:1 - 13.

Introduction

Today, 31st May, is Pentecost, sometimes referred to as Whit Sunday, and it is a Principal Festival in the Christian calendar. The Day of Pentecost is often referred to as the Church's Birthday, as it marks the day when Jesus fulfilled His promise to pour out the Holy Spirit upon His followers, and thereby establish the Church proper. The Bible tells us there were 120 disciples gathered together in that Upper Room on that Day of Pentecost – they were waiting patiently for the Spirit, as Jesus had instructed them to. And, as we heard in our reading, the Holy Spirit of God came upon them in great power, and resting on each of them like tongues of fire and the whole room was filled with the sound of a great wind.

Harvest

We need to remember though, that Pentecost was a Jewish feast before it became a Christian festival. At the feast of Pentecost, called Shavuot in Hebrew (meaning Festival of Weeks) came exactly fifty days after the Passover. And on this festival of Shavuot, the Jews celebrated the first fruits of the harvest. So it's no accident then, that the Lord chose this day to send his Holy Spirit upon the disciples, for He was now ready to gather in a harvest of His own; a harvest, not of wheat but of people. The coming of the Spirit was the signal that the Lord was ready to send His people out into the world and gather in the Lord's Harvest. But this was never going to be a simple matter of engaging with a friendly and welcoming world, because as we know, it was very much the opposite. The world proved to be a hostile and difficult place in which to preach the Gospel of Christ.

So it was important then, that Jesus' somewhat ragged band of followers, be ready and prepared for the task that lay ahead. So the Lord sent the Holy Spirit upon them on the Day of Pentecost, fulfilling the promise he made to them, before He ascended to the Father.

The Spirit that Jesus poured out upon them, was the Spirit of power, to strengthen them for the mission. It was the Spirit of life; the guarantee of Christ's presence with them. It was Spirit of truth, to impart wisdom through God's Word. And it was the Spirit of fellowship and love, that bound the disciples together in a new way. And so the Church was born.

Transformation

This experience transformed the disciples into a dynamic force - led, empowered and sustained by the very Spirit of God Himself. Indeed, following Peter's first sermon that same day, 3,000 people came to faith in Christ and were added to the Church.

In the many battles that lay ahead, instead of using swords and spears, the disciples had far more powerful weapons: they had the message of a new King and a new Kingdom. It was a message of love and reconciliation; a message of forgiveness, hope and salvation. This message proved so powerful, that, in the end it eventually overcame even the mighty Roman Empire itself. St Paul tells us that you reap what sow. God had sown the seeds of His Holy Spirit amongst those early disciples and now He was gathering in His harvest.

Law

However, the Jewish feast of Pentecost (Shavuot) also had a second level of significance in Jewish teaching, because it was also a celebration of the day that God gave His Law and Commandments to the nation of Israel on Mt. Sinai, at the time of Moses. As a result of receiving God's Law, the people of Israel were able to know more about God and better understand how to worship, honour and obey Him.

So this link between Pentecost and God's Word - is it just another coincidence? Of course not - because the Holy Spirit also enables us to better understand God's Word. Indeed He, the Spirit, brings God's Word alive for us. He takes what the worlds sees as a dry and dusty old book and turns into it something wonderful – something special, something alive and vibrant! The Spirit uses God's Word to transform our hearts and minds, that we might become more Christ-like in our behaviour and attitude.

Jesus told the disciples that, when the Spirit comes He will lead them into all truth, by taking God's Word and making it known to us, His followers.

So if we find God's word difficult, heavy or hard-going, then pray that the Holy Spirit will help you. Pray that He will bring the Word alive for you, because as followers of Jesus, we need to dwell in God's Word, and the Spirit will help us to do that much more effectively. But we have to want that - as the Spirit will not force us to do anything. Rather we have to allow ourselves to be moved by the Holy Spirit.

Today

So, coming back to that first day of Pentecost when the disciples were enabled by the Spirit, to speak in other tongues; and Peter preached a sermon and 3,000 people were added to the Church - does it still have any relevance today, here at the beginning of 21st century?

Well our situation now is not as far removed from the early church as it might appear. Our task is still to extend God's Kingdom and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. There are still plenty of battles left for us to fight; some we will win, others we will lose. But, just like those first disciples, we know that ultimate victory has already been secured through the Cross of Christ, and in the end God's Mission will be accomplished.

And, like those early disciples, the Lord has given us - through His Spirit - all the gifts and talents we need to proclaim the Gospel, to share our faith and extend God's Kingdom in this place. It won't be easy, at times it will be difficult, the world is still in many ways a hostile place to the Gospel of Christ. But in Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can face the challenges that lie ahead with the assurance that God is as much with us today as He was with those first disciples - we have not been left as orphans; Christ has neither abandoned us nor forgotten us, and His Spirit still empowers and leads the Church today, as He always has done, and always will do. Amen.