

**Acts 2** When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues<sup>l</sup> <sup>1</sup> as the Spirit enabled them.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. <sup>7</sup> Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?’ <sup>8</sup> Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,<sup>l</sup> <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome <sup>11</sup> (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ <sup>12</sup> Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’

<sup>13</sup> Some, however, made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine.’

<sup>14</sup> Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. <sup>15</sup> These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> “‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. <sup>18</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. <sup>20</sup> The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

**John 15** <sup>26</sup> I will send you the Spirit who comes from the Father and shows what is true. The Spirit will help you and will tell you about me. <sup>27</sup> Then you will also tell others about me, because you have been with me from the beginning.

<sup>16</sup> I am telling you this so that you will not fall away. <sup>2</sup> They will put you out of the synagogue. And the time will come when people will kill you and think they are doing God a favour. <sup>3</sup> They will do these things because they don’t know either the Father or me. <sup>4</sup> I am saying this to you now, so that when the time comes, you will remember what I have said.

I was with you, and so I didn’t tell you these things at first. <sup>5</sup> But now I am going back to the Father who sent me, and none of you asks me where I am going. <sup>6</sup> You are very sad from hearing all of this. <sup>7</sup> But I tell you that I am going to do what is best for you. That is why I am going away.

The Holy Spirit cannot come to help you until I leave. But after I am gone, I will send the Spirit to you.

<sup>8</sup> The Spirit will come and show the people of this world the truth about sin and God’s justice and the judgment. <sup>9</sup> The Spirit will show them that they are wrong about sin, because they didn’t have faith in me. <sup>10</sup> They are wrong about God’s justice, because I am going to the Father, and you won’t see me again. <sup>11</sup> And they are wrong about the judgment, because God has already judged the ruler of this world.

<sup>12</sup> I have much more to say to you, but right now it would be more than you could understand. <sup>13</sup> The Spirit shows what is true and will come and guide you into the full truth. The Spirit doesn’t speak on his own. He will tell you only what he has heard from me, and he will let you know what is going to happen. <sup>14</sup> The Spirit will bring glory to me by taking my message and telling it to you. <sup>15</sup> Everything that the Father has is mine. That is why I have said that the Spirit takes my message and tells it to you.

**Intro:** I don't know about you, but I often find myself thinking that it seems like a pretty difficult task just to share the good news of Jesus with the good people of Cholsey and Moulsoford, let alone actually persuade them to become committed followers of Jesus. So it is good to be reminded just how impossible a mission it must have seemed to the Jesus' disciples when He told them that they had to be his witnesses and take his message into all the world.

Jesus was totally candid about just how difficult the task would be:

*Gospel reading: John 16:2 They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.*

Before this: *Just as they persecuted me, so they will persecute you*

Since Jesus had spoken these words to them, the disciples had seen Jesus arrested, tried on trumped up charges, they had seen the mob in Jerusalem, baying for Jesus' death, and then Jesus flogged to within an inch of his life, and nailed to a cross to suffer an agonising death.

Not only this but when their own mettle had been tested they had discovered just how weak they were: when Jesus had been arrested they had all run away and when Peter their leader had been asked by a serving girl if he had anything to do with Jesus, he had denied that he even knew him. By no stretch of the imagination could it be said that this motley crew of fearful, incompetent men had any hope of successfully taking the message of Jesus into such a hostile world.

And Jesus had had the nerve to say that it was for their **good** that he was going away to leave them to get on with the task He had given them! Imagine how the disciples must have felt, as they trudged back to Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus.

After all the fulfilment and excitement of being alongside Jesus for the last 3 years, and the supreme joy of spending time with him after the resurrection, surely now everything would be like living in black and white after the technicolour of their former life with Jesus.

And on top of that they were faced with the impossible task of sharing the good news of Jesus in a hostile world.

It is very easy to identify with the disciples.

We live in a world that seems increasingly opposed to the Christian faith: *the wide-spread assumption – certainly in the media – that the Christian view of marriage is not only out-dated but positively bigoted. A little while ago a nurse from Somerset was suspended for offering to pray for an elderly patient's recovery from illness. Whit Monday bank holiday.*

And yet here we are today celebrating with 1000's of millions of Christians across the world, what is sometimes called the church's birthday – Pentecost. This same weak fearful group of disciples somehow succeeded in their impossible mission of taking the good news of Jesus not only to the hostile crowds of Jerusalem, but into the whole of Judaea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

*I am reminded of the famous last words of Hugh Latimer to Nicholas Ridley as they were burnt at the stake just up the road in Oxford on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1555 "Be of good cheer Master Ridley...we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."*

Well the first candle was lit on the day of Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago.

The reason Jesus had said it was good that he was leaving the disciples is because it was the only way that He could send them his Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, the Spirit of Truth.

Jesus said that the Spirit would tell the world about Him.

How would he do that? Through the disciples. **John 15** <sup>26</sup> *The Spirit will help you and will tell you about me.* <sup>27</sup> *Then you will also tell others about me*

But as we have seen, when it came to standing up for Jesus, the disciples were as good as useless. Lacking faith, understanding, courage. No wonder Jesus had told them wait in Jerusalem until power from on high came upon them. But on Pentecost, how that power came!

**First the mighty wind:** *the life-giving breath of God which had brought dead, inanimate Adam to life and would now bring new spiritual life to those feeble disciples. Remember Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones...*

Jesus had told Nicodemus: *John 3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*

*We cannot tell where it comes from:* Like the first disciples, we cannot go and fetch the Holy Spirit, we cannot organise Him to come – all we can do is long for Him, wait for him and be ready when He turns up.

*Neither do we know where the wind is going* – the disciples can have had no idea where the Spirit would lead them, but they trusted and surrendered to his direction. Peter ended up in Rome, John on the Isle of Patmos, Thomas possibly in India. We can only do the same. We cannot direct where the Holy Spirit goes – *He directs us.*

### **Secondly, Tongues of fire –**

Throughout the Old Testament, fire was a sign of the holy and purifying, transforming presence of God. Remember Moses and the burning bush; the pillar of fire that led the children of Israel by night out of Egypt and through the desert; the shining dazzling glory that came first into the Tabernacle and later the temple; or Isaiah's vision of the Lord - *high and lifted up, surrounded by the seraphim – the flaming ones - crying Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.*

Now, at Pentecost, this fire separates into individual flames which land on the head of each disciple. Jesus had promised that He and his Father would come and make their home in each of the disciples – this is what is happening here: the holy, purifying presence of God is coming into each individual follower of Jesus, burning up all that is impure, filling each with the warmth of his love, and the light of his presence, and a new dynamic power.

### **So thirdly, they start declaring the wonders of God.**

The disciples find themselves so filled with the joy and love of God, that they cannot keep quiet about it. Their words come out in special languages so that somehow, everyone could understand them - even though the crowds came from all over the known world.

Some in the crowd thought they were drunk.

I wonder what made them think that. I suspect the disciples *were* drunk – drunk with laughter as they realised that Jesus had kept his promise and had now returned not just to be with them once more but actually to be inside them

Our gospel reading reminded us that Jesus also said the Spirit would not only transform the **disciples** but also be at work in **the world** around them:

*John 16:8 When he comes, [the Spirit] will convict the world...in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.* What did Jesus mean by this ? This passage coming, as it does today, in conjunction with the story of Pentecost in Acts 2, illustrates beautifully what Jesus was saying through what happened in Jerusalem on that day.

The religious leaders had been convinced that Jesus was far from righteous, that he must be a charlatan – a pretender.

In their eyes, the very fact that he had ended up hanging on a cross proved that he could not possibly be God's anointed Messiah as he claimed to be. They knew from their Scripture that *Anyone who hangs on a tree was under God's curse*

On Pentecost, Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, proclaims that Jesus has proved that He was indeed the Messiah - not only because of the miracles He had performed, but supremely because He had risen from the dead. And if Jesus really was risen - as the disciples knew beyond all shadow of a doubt he was - then he must be precisely who he claimed to be: the Righteous One, the Messiah, the Son of God. At the same time Peter showed how wrong they were – their sin – in refusing to believe that Jesus really was the Messiah and sending him to his death.

It was the Spirit that enabled Peter and the disciples to proclaim this truth with such conviction that <sup>37</sup> *When the people heard [what Peter said], they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'* In the days that followed, literally 1000s upon 1000s came to faith. This was the Holy Spirit doing his work just as Jesus had promised – but through Peter and the disciples.

Like the disciples we sometimes feel very small and incapable of fulfilling the mission Jesus has given us – to make disciples of the people in Cholsey & Moulsoford. Like the disciples we need to recognise that we are weak and useless and can do nothing apart from Christ. Like the disciples we need to long desperately for the Holy Spirit. And then we will find that He is only at work in us but in the hearts of those for whom we pray. And who knows what fire He will set alight.