

USPG Sermon for Sunday 23 May Pentecost – The Rt Rev'd Joanna Penberthy

Reading Acts 2:1-21

Text Acts 2:4 “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit”

Today as the USPG family we are celebrating Pentecost, alongside our sisters and brothers in the rest of the Protestant and Catholic world wide church, (Orthodox Pentecost Sunday this year is on Jun 20th,).

Wherever we are, this Pentecost, we are facing the challenges of Covid 19. We are seeing the impact of this pandemic upon our people, our healthcare systems, our economic infrastructures and political leaders.

Whether our governments have acted wisely or unwisely, whether they have acted for their people or not, whether our governments have been generous or been hampered by the actions of richer nations or by other economic vested interests, this has been made clear to us. We are all the wiser for what we have or are still living through.

And all this under the shadow of our warming planet.

Yet, today, we are reminded that God the Father, has filled the Church with the Holy Spirit that we might be witnesses, both in our lives and by our words, to our risen ascended Lord in this world as it really is.

As I read about the coming of the Holy Spirit, I am startled by its simplicity. As I prepare this sermon, I come fresh from our Diocesan conference, where we are thinking of three year plans, Diocesan strategy, Diocesan budgets. Human plans no doubt necessary but in what contrast to the simplicity to the coming of the Spirit, sent by God to the apostles after the promise of Jesus to the his disciples “You shall be my witnesses” said Jesus, in St Luke’s account in Acts C1 just before our Lord disappears from their sight from the last time, “You shall be my witnesses.”

The comforting truth of this passage in Acts 2 is that there is nothing out of the ordinary that we are expected to do.

We as Christians do not have to conjure the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God’s gracious gift to the Church and to each individual baptised Christian. We are baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles once for all at that Pentecost and comes to all Christians at

baptism. There are some aspects of the Holy Spirit's work that are the same for all Christians wherever and whenever they live.

St Paul says in Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit dwells in and intercedes for the Christian, "with groans too deep for words." As we go about our lives, the Holy Spirit is praying for us and in us, while in 2 Corinthians 3:18 St Paul takes this further. Paul says the Spirit changes us into the likeness of Christ "And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another.." As we open ourselves to be open to the gift of God's Holy Spirit given to the Church and to each member of the Church at Pentecost, a gift never to be taken back, as we really open our real selves to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we, by God's grace, become God's dwelling place, as human and as imperfect as we still remain.

There is nothing out of the ordinary that we are expected to do but day by day open ourselves to a relationship with the Lord who is Spirit, who prays for us and conforms us to Christ in a relationship that is both individual but also corporate. For Paul, the Spirit dwelling within us in the midst of our ordinary human lives in whatever the circumstances we find ourselves, as we open ourselves to grace, is transformative. Whether our lives are run of the mill or challenging, we can as individuals and as church communities open ourselves to the reality of the Holy Spirit who is always waiting and who grows in us all the fruits that St Paul listed in Galatians, 5:22-3, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control." and, as St Paul said in 2 Corinthians, "from one degree of glory to another." This is the Spirit's work of grace in all the baptised.

While the fruits of the Spirit are the same in each individual also by the same Spirit, as individuals we are all each given different and unique specific callings and gifts to be used for the common good. The image as the Church as the body with individual each as different parts of the body is a well known image for the Church, used in three of the Epistles, in the letter to the Ephesians 4:11-13; I Cor 12:4-11; and Roms 12:4-8. The lists of gifts and abilities given to individuals to be exercised within the community for the building up of the body of Christ for the common good in these three passages is varied. These passages mention for example, , prophets, teachers, deacons, exhorters, leaders, apostles, workers of miracles, healers, administrators, those who speak in tongues, shepherds, evangelists to name but a few. Some of these have by our day become specific roles, orders or jobs, whether stipendiary, salaried or voluntary but it is still important to see them as charisms granted by the Spirit's grace for the good of the whole and respected as such.

So, what starts off as a simple experience in Acts on the Day of Pentecost of the apostles giving praise to God in languages of which they are naturally unaware becomes a rich and every widening lived experience of

God's grace in action mirrored across the pages of the New Testament. The same Spirit has made this experience of lived grace real again and again in lives of believers across the centuries in different places and contexts and today offers us the promise of making it fresh for us once more in our Covid 19 world, amongst the systemic inequalities of which we are all still aware and which remain the daily realities of us all.

This transformative work of the Spirit in the individual Christian and the Spirit's gifts to the Church community enables us to fulfil the one great commission that has been laid upon us. We have not been sent by Jesus to make an Empire, found a Kingdom, or conquer worlds. No, it is all so much simpler than that. The last command that Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew's gospel somewhat obscured in the English language because of the language we use to express it. In English, the Great Commission for which the Church exists is "Go and make disciples of all nations." I am fortunate to come from Wales where there is an older language. There are other languages spoken in Wales of course as well as English and Welsh but I shall just refer here to the older language spoken here Welsh where the word for disciple sounds the same, *disgybl* and of course it is the same word. But in Welsh the word, used for "disciples" "*disgyblion*" is the same word that is still used for school children. So when my children went to school at 3, they became *disgyblion*, pupils. When I hear the Great Commission in Welsh I hear Disciple as pupil, and remember my little children starting at infant school, I think of us as Christian pupils not as finished products but works in progress, people still very much on the way. The Spirit's transforming work of grace among us as individuals is to make us those who learn day by day as pupils of Jesus, the Spirit's transforming work of grace amongst us as church communities is to make our church communities classrooms, studios, oasis of grace and sanctuary where we are safe and help each other to grow into the the likeness of Christ so that together we may become in our communities signposts of the kingdom that is to come.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father

As we rejoice together on this day of Pentecost, we thank you once again that you fulfilled your promise to send the Holy Spirit upon the apostles that they might bear witness to Jesus. We thank you for the witness of the Church through the centuries and across the globe. We pray for the USPG community across the world, we pray that you will pour out your spirit upon us afresh that we might open our hearts and lives to your Spirit and so bear witness to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that healing streams of grace may flow to a world in need.

Yn enw Iesu Crist ein Arglwydd. Amen,