

Reflection - Sunday 31st May

Acts 2:1-21 - It's all about the fire, fire, fire!

Will it ever happen? Will the end ever come? I'm sure there have been moments in the last few months when we've all asked those questions. When will the end arrive? When will things get back to normal? I think though we are all realising that the concept of an 'end' to these peculiar times is not quite the right one and it's much more likely to be a number of gradual evolutions towards a different way of life. Yet as we move forward there will be watershed moments, moments when significant things change, for example when we can visit our families or open the doors of the church building again.

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the end of the great 50 days - the period of 50 days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday. Today we celebrate the great gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on God's people, the gift of the advocate, the helper, the Holy Spirit, that Jesus promised to his disciples. Yet a bit like 'the end' of lockdown, Pentecost is not an end at all. It's often seen as the start of the Church, many say Pentecost is the Church's birthday. Yet I think we have to be careful if we call it a beginning as that sounds like the work of the Spirit begins at Pentecost. Pentecost is a significant moment in the story of salvation, of God's people, it is the moment when we know that God will never abandon his people here on earth but is always with us, but it's not the beginning and it's not the end.

Like many Christian festivals Pentecost was a Jewish festival on which a significant event happened through which the understanding of the festival was changed. Think about how the Passover changed when Jesus shared the last supper with his friends. Pentecost was also known as the Festival of Weeks, the festival when Jewish communities 50 days after Passover would present the first fruits of the corn harvest to God and give thanks for God's goodness and provision.

Acts 2 tells us that 50 days after the Passover the disciples are gathered together to celebrate the Festival of the Weeks, they know that Jesus has ascended to heaven and told them to wait, so together that's what they are doing. Then suddenly everything changes, the Spirit blows through the place with tongues of fire, and everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit. This was without a doubt a most remarkable moment, a moment when the power and love of God was displayed in a way it had never been seen before. A moment when the people who were filled with the Spirit were transformed and equipped to speak for God in new and different ways.

Pentecost was never to be the same again, God had reshaped the festival so that it wasn't about giving back the first fruits but was suddenly about the whole life of the disciples being transformed by God and equipped by God. From that moment onwards the disciples, the apostles, the early Church were equipped to go out as witnesses for God, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus' resurrection and the salvation that offers. Those of us who have been studying Acts on a Tuesday evening over the last five weeks has had the opportunity to look at the life of the early Church in Jerusalem. As we've studied together we've seen how they were focussed on being witnesses, on learning to live and worship together, on praying for healing and most of all of seeing God at work in new and amazing ways.

Without a doubt Pentecost transformed the life of the early Church, it equipped the apostle by filling them with God's Spirit, encouraging them to be witnesses and equipping them to do the work of God. A massively significant day in the life of the Church, a watershed moment in the story of salvation.

But what does it mean for us? The Holy Spirit came 2000 years ago at Pentecost and is still here with us. The Holy Spirit is just as important to the Church today as it was 2000 years ago. So what does that mean for us in 2020?

There is a song by an artist Meja (Me aa) from the late 1990's called '*It's all about the money*' and it has the line in it '*It's all about the money, money, money*'. Well Pentecost is not all about the money (!), but it's all about the fire, fire, fire, it's all about the fire, fire, fire!

The image of fire is strong through the account of Pentecost in Acts 2. The disciples were touched with tongues of fire, they were filled with the Holy Spirit like fire fills a grate or engulfs a building. Pentecost is all about the fire, fire, fire!

What do I mean by that, well I think Pentecost is about being Filled, Interwoven, Refined, Equipped. F for filled, I for Interwoven, R for Refined, E for Equipped. It's all about the fire, fire, fire!

Filled - when the Holy Spirit came those who received it were filled with something they couldn't explain but others could see. As Christians we can be filled with the Holy Spirit just as the disciples were at Pentecost. In Acts we see that for some people that happens when they come to faith and for others the filling of the Holy Spirit is a separate event on their journey of faith. It's the same for Christians today, some feel the sense of being filled with the Holy Spirit when they come to faith, for others it happens further down the journey. For all of us there are times when we seem filled with the Spirit and times when the Spirit feels like the smallest of flames. The promise of God is that the Spirit will never leave us.

When we are filled with the Holy Spirit we have an overwhelming sense of the presence of God within us, a sense of God living within us, in our heart, in our blood. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit faith isn't just something we think about, or learn about or know in our heads. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit faith is something tangible in every part of our body and just like those disciples at Pentecost we struggle to explain exactly what it feels like but we know it's happen to us and others can see something different about us.

Pentecost is about being filled with the Spirit

Interwoven - the presence of God's Spirit wasn't new at Pentecost, we see God's Spirit at work throughout the Bible right from the creation story. Yet at Pentecost what changes is that the Spirit is no longer for particular people in particular moments but is poured out on all people. In the words of verse 21, for everyone who calls on the name of Lord. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit it is not just us who are filled with Spirit, we are filled with the Spirit just as other members of God's family are. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit we are interwoven into the Body of Christ, woven together with everyone else who is filled with the Spirit so that we can live together

as one body for God. As the body between us we have all the gifts that are needed for the Church to fulfil its purpose. Not individually but woven together as one body.

Filled, Interwoven.

Refined - fire gives us such a powerful image doesn't it, we know that fire changes things, burns things, devastates things. Fire can be gentle and controlled like a gas rings or rage across a field and destruct. The Holy Spirit is at work, it isn't a dormant present in us. The Holy Spirit is at work and desires to refine us, to mould us, to reshape us. Why? The Spirit of God refines us into the image of Jesus so that we can be better witnesses for Jesus.

Refining isn't an easy process, it's one where the bits of us and the bits of the world that are not in line with God's world are burnt away at so that they are able to more and more reflect the glory of God. The refining work of the Spirit might be about who we see ourselves as, it might be about what we do or are called to do, it might be about actions in our lives which God wants to change.

But the refining work is not just about us, the world also needs to be refined and the Holy Spirit will use us to refine the world, to speak out about injustice, racism - what do we say as Christians about the death of George Floyd by a white police officer? How do we refine the world by the power of the Holy Spirit within us to ensure racism is eliminated? Let us never forget, in the words of a Methodist Standing Order, that racism is a denial of the Gospel.

For me at this time of lockdown we are being refined, individually, as the Church and in the world. That isn't easy to say, but we only have to look at the environmental benefits of being locked down, the changes to our working patterns, to the time spent with family. All ways that I believe we are being refined by God.

It's not easy to be refined, it's not easy to be changed by God, but in the words of last weeks sermon and hymn, if we want to cast our crowns, we need to be changed from glory into glory.

Filled, Interwoven, Refined and then

Equipped - Equipped to be witnesses to the good news of God in Christ. The major theme throughout the book of Acts is of being witnesses, being witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus and the eternal life that offers. We are filled so that we can be witnesses, we are interwoven with the body of Christ so that we can be witnesses together, we are refined so that we are able to proclaim who Jesus is and to share testimony of the work of the Spirit within us.

It's all about the fire, fire, fire.

Pentecost is about being Filled, Interwoven, Refined and Equipped, that's what it means for us today.

But there is one crucial fact we have to remember when we consider and celebrate Pentecost. When the Spirit came in Acts 2 we see the fire, the tongues, the loud noises, you couldn't miss it. But if we read throughout scripture we see the Spirit at work in many different ways and on many more occasions the Spirit is quiet and gentle rather than loud and noisy.

As one wise minister once put it to me, the Holy Spirit is a gentleman, it won't force itself on anyone and therefore to misquote a Disney movie, we have to 'let it in, let it in, let it in'!

I'm reminded of the story of Moses and the burning bush from Exodus 3. If you've read the story you'll know that Moses sees a bush on fire but sees that the bush is not burning up. Then Moses says 'I will go over and see this bush'. Moses turns to the fire, Moses chooses to be attentive to the fire and when he is he hears God's voice call to him from within the flames.

It's the same for us as followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is here, is with us, is within us but like Moses we have a choice. Do we want to turn to the Spirit, do we want to let the Spirit fill us, interweave us, refine us, equip us? Do we want to let the Spirit in or do we want to keep the Spirit at arms distance?

For if we turn to the Holy Spirit we will be filled again and again and again, refreshed again and again and again. Just like the prophet Joel says we will see sons and daughters prophesy, we will see young men, and women, seeing visions, old men, and women, will dream dreams. We will see the body of Christ strengthened and interwoven, we will be refined and transformed, we will be equipped afresh to be witnesses to the good news of Jesus.

If we don't then we will keep wandering along, we'll wander roughly in God's direction I imagine but we won't experience the full power of God's love and transformation, we won't know the full joy of life in all it's fullness. God knew we couldn't do that on our own which is why the Holy Spirit was sent. But if we choose not to be attentive to the Spirit we won't experience life in all it's fullness.

To choose not be attentive to God's Spirit is a bit like buying a washing machine and using it but never putting any washing power in. Yes the clothes will get wet, the water will clean them and you can probably get away with wearing them, but lets be honest they won't smell great and they won't be mighty white!

It's all about the fire, fire, fire and we need to let it in, let it in, let it in!

As we look to the next stage of lockdown life as God's people I truly believe we need to let the Spirit of God into our lives and into our Churches. In fact I want to acknowledge that we already are for when I meet with the Church Stewards, when I talk with the pastoral visitors it is so obvious that people are praying, listening and walking in the power of God's Spirit during this time.

But if we are going to emerge well from lockdown, well in ourselves and grasping the opportunities it gives us as a Church to be different then more than ever we need to be attentive to the Holy Spirit, more than ever we need to let the Spirit weave us together, refine us and equip us.

We know the next few weeks and months are not going to be easy. If we try and travel through them in our own strength they will be even harder. But if we turn to the Holy Spirit, if we turn to God, if we let the fire in then, it will be much easier. More than that it will be exciting, it will be transforming, it will be joyful, hopeful, for we will see the work of God so alive amongst us.

Until a few years ago Pentecost was more of a season than a day and still is in some places, the season of Whitsun or Whitsuntide, named after the white robes that priests wore at Pentecost and reflected the light of the sun, where I grew up in Manchester Whit Walks are still a big thing. Like the great 50 days of Easter, Whitsun is the season of the Holy Spirit. I believe more than ever we need a season of the Spirit at the moment as we live through lockdown and look to a different yet exciting future with God.

It's all about the fire, fire, fire, it's all about letting it in, letting it in, letting it in.

How will that happen? Well it starts very simply by each and everyone of us turning to the fire, being attentive to the Spirit and letting the Spirit fill us afresh. As I said earlier there are times when we don't turn to the Spirit, times when we don't want to be refined, times when we want to walk in our own strength.

Whilst we have to be attentive to the Spirit everyday, as we celebrate Pentecost today we have a particular opportunity to turn to the Spirit, to be attentive to the Spirit and to let God pour the Holy Spirit deep within us again. In a moment we're going to listen to the song Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on me. As we do I invite you to consciously turn your heart to the Spirit, to be attentive to the Holy Spirit amongst us. As you do ask God to fill you afresh, to weave you anew into the body of Christ, to refine you and equip you. Let God's Holy Spirit fill you with fire, let the Spirit in.

As we do, let us give thanks to God that by sending the Spirit we will never be alone but always have God with us, always have with us the one who gives us life, the one who fills us with love.

As we are filled, as we give thanks, may we be transformed together from glory into glory! May we know the power of God's love within us. May we be equipped to be the Church afresh and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

It's all about the fire, fire, fire, it's all about letting it in, letting it in, letting it in. Amen.