

Sermon 20 May 2024 Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-12 John 15:26-27,16:5-15

It was the Day of Pentecost and the disciples, along with countless others, were gathered together. So first let's take a look at just what this Day of Pentecost is.

Pentecost is one of the main Jewish festivals and people from near and far would converge on Jerusalem in order to celebrate it. The festival had two main significances. Firstly, it had an historical significance. It commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt Sinai. Secondly, it had an agricultural significance. It celebrated the beginning of the barley harvest.

It was a public holiday and the law stipulated that no work should be done. *'On the first day of the Festival of the Harvest, when you present the first of your new grain to the Lord, you must call it a holy assembly of the people. None of your regular work must be done on that day.'* Numbers 28:21. So that is why everyone was gathered together on this occasion.

What happened at Pentecost, we really do not know for certain except that the disciples had an experience of the power of the Holy Spirit flowing into their beings such as they never had before. This was manifested in three ways – by a strong wind, tongues of fire, which appeared above their heads, and speaking in tongues.

There is some uncertainty as to just what took place in terms of speaking in tongues. Did they actually speak in languages foreign to them? Who knows? So many different languages were being spoken that it is hard to say.

What is undisputed is that they were definitely filled with the Holy Spirit. So, who or what is the Holy Spirit? To answer that question we need to think of the two p's – the presence of God and the power of God. Let's begin with the presence of God.

God is always with us because I believe God is actually part of us. Whether we acknowledge that part of us is entirely up to us; that's the freedom of choice God gives us. How else can we explain that God knows just what we are thinking at any moment of the day or night? We actually can't get away from God! The psalmist puts it so very well in Psalm 139:7-8: *'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.'*

A very interesting point here. The psalmist says, *'Where can I go from your Spirit?'* and then goes on to refer to God's presence. So, in two short sentences he very succinctly makes the point that God's presence and God's Spirit are one and the same.

We often refer to someone's 'spiritual side.' We all have a spiritual dimension; it's just that not everyone taps into that side of them, but it is there and available to us. That is the presence of God. That is the Spirit of God. God is always there for us. *'The Lord will never leave you nor forsake you.'* Deuteronomy 31:8.

I want to make another point in terms of a presence within us. If we are prepared to take Jesus Christ on board into our lives, we automatically take on board the Holy Spirit. After all, they are very much one and the same, both being part of the Holy Trinity, which we will look at next week. Jesus promised, *'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'* Matthew 28:20. The Holy Spirit is simply the presence of God, the presence of Christ within us. What we do with that presence is up to us. And that leads us on to the second 'p' – the power of God.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus says, *'I will send you the Helper.'* Different translations use different terms here for the Holy Spirit – Comforter, Counsellor, Advocate. I find the term 'helper' to be very useful. The Holy Spirit helps me with my faith. How? I feel the presence of God when I pray and the power of God flowing through me as a result of my prayers. I feel the presence of God when I come to church and worship, and I feel the power of God working through the singing and the spiritual energy emanating from the people here.

We feel the presence and power of God when we each out to someone in need. God uses us as his agents of love in the world. When Jesus asks us to 'love our neighbour,' he is asking us to allow God to work through us in spreading healing, comfort, hope and love to people.

Anthong de Mello, Jesuit priest and spiritual teacher, in his book, 'The Song Bird,' writes, 'On the street I saw a small girl shivering in a thin dress, with little hope of a decent meal. I became angry and said to God, *'Why did you permit this?'* God replied, *'I certainly did do something about it. I made you.'*

There are acts of kindness and service being carried out every day by people everywhere, including you. That is the power of love at work. That is the power of God, the Holy Spirit at work.

So, God is my helper. Actually, I would take it a step further and say that without God I am helpless. Let me demonstrate with this glove. On its own, this glove is useless. If I ask the glove to pick up this pen, nothing is going to happen. But if I put my hand inside the glove, suddenly the glove takes on a life of its own. My hand in the glove gives it a life force. God's Spirit is my life force. With God's Spirit in me, I am empowered, just like this glove becomes empowered when I put my hand into it.

I want to finish by making this point. When a community allows the Holy Spirit to work its magic in its midst, great things can happen. The Holy Spirit has the power to turn small things into big things. Let me share an example with you.

In 1912, Dr Russell Conwell, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Philadelphia, told about a Sunday School student named Hattie Wiatt. Because of overcrowding, Dr Conwell had told Hattie he would love to have buildings large enough for everyone to attend Sunday School. When Hattie became ill and died, Dr Conwell was asked to preach at her funeral. Hattie's mother had told Conwell that Hattie had been saving to help build a bigger church. Her purse contained coins amounting to 57 cents. Conwell auctioned these coins and raised enough money to buy a nearby house as a children's wing for the church. Inspired by Hattie's story, more money came in and out of her 57 cents eventually came the buildings of Temple Baptist Church, Temple University and the Good Samaritan Hospital.

When we give our gifts or talents to God, no matter how small they might seem to be, he can use his power to turn them into something very significant.

In conclusion, back to the disciples at Pentecost. Because they were now filled with the Holy Spirit, they had the power to go out and preach, teach, heal and baptise people in the name of Jesus. Communities were set up of people who believed in Jesus as coming from God. They became known as Christians, and they worshipped as Christians, and so our Christian Church was born. Happy birthday, Church!