

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 31st MAY 2020
PENTECOST

INTRODUCTION

Dove, breath of God, wind, still small voice, raging fire, living water – people have always struggled for images to talk about the Holy Spirit. And perhaps the point is that these images remind us of the danger of thinking we understand God, that we can categorise Him. He is, in a well-known phrase, the “God of Surprises”.

As we prepare to worship, take a moment to become aware of how you are thinking about God. Be honest. Does he feel boring? Predictable? Then open your heart to the possibility that God – by His Spirit, present with and in you now – may want to do something fresh and even (dare I say it?) a little bit dangerous in your life. Or does he feel distant and uncaring? In which case, allow the Comforter to draw nearer than you thought possible.

OPENING OURSELVES TO GOD'S PRESENCE

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people
and kindle in us the fire of your love.

All who are led by the Spirit of God
are children of God and fellow-heirs with Christ.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people

Renew the face of your Creation, Lord,
pouring on us the gifts of your Spirit,

and kindle in us the fire of your love.

For the Creation waits with eager longing
for the glorious liberty of the children of God.

**Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people
and kindle in us the fire of your love.**

(Compare Romans 8)

**Blessed are you, Creator God,
to you be praise and glory for ever.**

**As your Spirit moved in the beginning over the face of the
waters**

bringing light and life to your creation,

pour out your Spirit on us today

that we may walk as children of light

and by your grace reveal your presence.

Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Blessed be God for ever.

Amen.

Jesus promised to all who put their trust in him, that “rivers of living water” would well up within them, bringing abundant life. Let us allow the Spirit of God to clear away whatever gets in the way of that life-giving stream.

Living God, You make us a temple in which Your Spirit dwells
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Glorified Christ, you came to bring a fire upon Earth. Purify our hearts and lives by your renewing grace.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Spirit of truth, consecrate our lives by your truth, that we may live as children of light.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

GOSPEL READING (John 7:37-39)

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Thanks be to God.

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Acts 2:1-21)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of

them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,*

*and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will
pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the
earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be
saved.'*

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Revd Sheila Nall)

Today is Pentecost. It's originally a Jewish Festival: 50 days after the second day of Passover. In England, it was more often called 'Whit Sunday' and in the north of England where I come from, it was the day when we had 'the Whit Walks', marching around the parish making a lot of noise. It's the day when we remember the start of the Christian Church, the day when the Spirit came down as Jesus had promised, to give courage and power to a bunch of frightened men.

We heard Luke's account of how it was, or rather, Luke's attempt to describe the indescribable. The noise was *like* a rushing wind: not really a rushing wind but that's as close as Luke can get. It was *like* fire; not really fire but something he

doesn't have words for and fire is the closest he can get. You get the point: Luke is trying to give us some idea of what it was like to experience this amazing, earth-shattering, utterly strange, seriously weird ...stuff....when the Spirit came and changed ...everything; when these ordinary men were filled with the Spirit and did things they didn't know they were capable of.

They even spoke in languages they didn't know – and in such a way that they were understood. People listened to them; people, who wouldn't normally look twice at these rough, uneducated Galileans, were interested to hear what they had to say. Amazing!

It's a great story. But Spirit? Well, it's a bit sort of amorphous, wishy-washy, not much use in a practical kind of a way. Maybe...

I know Jesus promised to send his Spirit to be with us – it's what today is about – but sometimes, now perhaps, when the going gets tough we can be forgiven for wishing for something a bit more *real*, something you can actually point to.

There's a story about a child who woke up one night after a frightening nightmare. She was convinced that there were all kinds of monsters under the bed. Her dad calmed her down and told her she needn't be afraid because, he said, God is

right here with you in your room. The little girl replied, 'I know God is here, but I need someone in my room that has some skin on.'

We need a God who has some skin on. We need God to be present here and now— someone we can touch and see.

Most of us don't find God in some obscure setting like a mountain monastery. Most of us need to find God in the hum-drum of our everyday lives. We need to hold on to God when we're discouraged. We need God to give us a gentle kick in the backside when we do things we shouldn't – or don't do things we should. We need a God with some skin on. Like the little girl in the story, we find it hard to be comforted by the *idea* of God. It's sometimes really hard to find the presence of a real, live, physically present God in our lives. But maybe that's because we're looking at it wrong. Maybe we're thinking of the incarnation as a 33 year long experiment; a one-off trip God made into human history – and now it's over. I suggest to you that the incarnation didn't end when Jesus went back to heaven. I suggest that the incarnation is still going on, day after day – and just as physically real as it was when Jesus tramped the dusty roads of Palestine 2000 years ago.

When the Holy Spirit came to fill those believers on the day of Pentecost – God once again took on flesh – got some skin on. By giving them the Holy Spirit, God awakened in them the gifts that God needed so he could be present in the world.

That Pentecost, God became dependent on human beings in a new way – and God has been dependent on us ever since.

This Pentecost, the Holy Spirit renews us as the body of Christ so that *we* continue to make sure God has some skin on. We are called to use the gifts God has given us so that those who need God in their lives – a real, physical God with skin – will be able to find that God. Jesus did it 2000 years ago – and now God is depending on us to do it.

It's up to us to make sure the incarnation continues to live on in us as the body of Christ so that all who need God's unconditional love will find it here – by finding God with skin on. A God who will comfort when they are afraid; a God who will reassure when life seems hardly worth living; a God who will share a joke or a sorrow; a God who will listen when they need to talk or keep comfortable silence when words won't come.

Saint Teresa of Avila put it like this:

*Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.*

*Yours are the eyes through which
Christ's compassion must look on the world.*

*Yours are the feet with which
he is to go about doing good.*

*Yours are the hands with which
he is to bless us now.*

It's a big responsibility but one God equips us for. That's what Pentecost is about: people, ordinary people, being filled with the Spirit of God and discovering they can do and be things they didn't know they had in them.

No pressure then: just be God with skin on. He's depending on you.

FOR REFLECTION....

Come down, O Love divine!
seek thou this soul of mine
and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

There let it freely burn
till earthly passions turn
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
and let thy glorious light
shine ever on my sight,
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

And so the yearning strong
with which the soul will long
shall far outpass the power of human telling;
for none can guess its grace
till we become the place
wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

PRAYERS

As the body of Christ,
In the power of the Spirit,
Let us pray.

For a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit
On the people of God all over the world.
For a readiness to be changed and made new;
For a softening of the ground of our hearts
To receive without fear.
For the courage to discover that we can do and be things we
didn't know we had in us,
and to learn to be for the world "God with skin on".

Silence

With our whole selves we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit of God.

For all the peoples of the earth
To know you and honour your name.
For the healing of the nations
And a new thirst for righteousness and purity
At every level and in every aspect of society.
For a dissatisfaction with the pursuit of pleasure
And all that distracts us from our true calling.

Silence

With our whole selves we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit of God.

For the grace and power to live out our faith
In the real and challenging world;
Among those we meet and eat with
Whose lives we share,
Without compromising that calling
To be the body of Christ,
Living God's integrity and purity,
Forgiveness and love.

Silence

With our whole selves we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit of God.

For those whose lives feel empty or cheated,
Or filled with pain, worry or guilt.
For all whose hopes and dreams are in tatters;
All who feel in any way imprisoned.
In a moment's silence we hold before God those on our hearts
today...

Silence

With our whole selves we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit of God.

For those who walk the dark journey of death
And all who have come through it into your presence;
For all who mourn – and especially any distressed by regrets
Or angry with God at their loss.
And for those whose anniversaries fall at this time – Ann
Jarrett, Hartley Brown, Johanna Anwyl-Hughes, Wendy Anwyl-
Hughes, Jill Scholes, Hilda Stewart, Roland Hill, and Freda
Hemmings.

Silence

With our whole selves we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit of God.

For all you have in store for us, we thank you;
We look forward to walking into the future
Of your promise, alive with your life.
Merciful Father
Accept these prayers
For the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer (this version, or the traditional one)

Being made one by the power of the Spirit, as our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

COMMITTING OURSELVES AFRESH TO THE WORK OF

GOD'S SPIRIT

You came like a dove
wings softly beating
resting on Jesus.

**Help us to be gentle
in our dealing with each other,
may we choose the path of peace.**

You came like a strong wind
breathing energy and power
into the believers.

**Help us to respond to your power
as we work in our homes and employment,
in our churches and communities.**

You came like tongues of fire
consuming doubts and fears
breaking down the barriers of language.

**Help us to keep the fire of our faith burning
fanning the flames until we live,
with the certainty of your presence within us.**

ENDING

**Holy Spirit:
wild wind, tongues of fire,
words of inspiration,
fill us with your confidence and energy,
and make us a blessing to the world.
Amen.**

SONG

***God be with you till we meet again;
By his counsels guide, uphold you;
With his sheep securely fold you.
God be with you till we meet again.***