

Sermon 5 June 2022

Pentecost Sunday.

Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:14-17

John 14:8-17, 25-27.

Can you remember when you first did something that you had been training for on your own?

I can remember the first time I drove a car on my own. I had had my lessons from the AA at school sharing them with a classmate. One of us drove while the other sat in the back and watched then we swapped over, trying to do our best and avoid any of the mistakes that the other had made. There were the stories that always got out of what had happened to others: the one who made a very good try at driving up a tree and the person who changed gears from 3rd to reverse along the main street of the city in the middle of the traffic (the car at home had gears in a different place).

Eventually though we arrived at the school gate and got into the car with the examiner and drove to return with or without that very important piece of paper that said we could drive.

I arrived home and very excitedly showed it to my mother who, after congratulating me, handed me the car keys and told me to go for a drive to the local town and back. Sitting in the car on my own, I didn't feel quite so confident but took a deep breath and very cautiously backed the car out and drove away and back again.

My mother explained to me that she knew several friends who had their licenses but never drove. One of my classmates was in a similar position. When she was in the car either her mother or her father drove.

One of the things I soon learnt was that it was when I was on my own that I really learned how to drive (with a few incidents that I never told my mother about).

Today is Pentecost Sunday. It is the second most important festival of the Christian church, with only Easter surpassing it. The third great festival, Christmas, only appeared quite some time later.

Pentecost means fifty and is fifty days after Easter and ten days after Ascension (which was Thursday week ago, although we celebrate it on last Sunday).

Jesus, after about three years of teaching his disciples, is arrested, tried and crucified, rising again on the third day and spends some time appearing to groups of disciples at various times and places. On Ascension Day he leaves and is no longer physically present but tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit who will be with them.

Pentecost is not just a Christian festival; it is also Jewish being the Festival of Weeks (seven weeks of weeks after Passover). Passover, as well as remembering the escape from Egypt, also was an agricultural festival with the first of the barley harvest and this one celebrates the first of the wheat harvest. It was a busy time, with almost as many people in Jerusalem as for Passover as it was a good time to travel. Consequently, there are many people there from all parts of the empire, from the East, towards modern day India, north to modern day Turkey and west to Rome, as well as south from Egypt.

Some were God-fearers and they would have spoken many languages of the various regions they came from but also Greek, the language of the empire, and possibly a bit of Latin and some Hebrew. The local language of the Jews was Aramaic, and we see that used by Jesus occasionally in the gospels.

It is noisy and crowded and something very special had to happen to get their attention. Acts gives us a picture of wind and what seemed to be tongues of fire and suddenly the disciples and those gathered (about 120 people) began to speak in languages other than their own that the people from all around the empire could understand due to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Peter takes the chance to stand up and begins to preach, quoting from Joel. The chapter continues with his explanation of who Jesus was, his life and how he was executed by the authorities but that he rose again in fulfilment of the promises made in the scriptures. He calls on them to repent and be baptised and three thousand were added to their number that day.

The Christian church was born! So Happy Birthday!

It's a dramatic picture and, in the West, we have tended to play down the drama and the role of the Holy Spirit (unlike the Eastern churches who have always had the Holy Spirit as central). It has only been recently (the last century or so) that Western churches have taken the Holy Spirit seriously and accepted (at least some of them) that the gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, still are given.

In the sermon that I gave a couple of weeks ago, I spoke of Paul and part of his story through Acts, noticing how the Holy Spirit guided him and the early church, through prophesy and visions. The Holy Spirit is quite firmly in charge, separating out Barnabas and Paul to travel to Antioch and not allowing Paul and his companions to minister in Asia (north-western Turkey) but guiding them to Macedonia and the city of Philippi.

A former vicar of mine wrote how half a century ago, when the charismatic renewal came upon mainline churches, he searched the New Testament for mentions of the Holy Spirit and highlighted each one. He said that the whole book glowed.

The Western church, he said, had often, in practice had displaced the Holy Spirit in the Trinity by using terms such as the 'Holy Church' (Anglicans? and Catholics?), the Holy Bible (Protestants?) or Holy Mary (Catholics?). When he started to take the Holy Spirit seriously, he found that the Holy Church, Bible and Mary also became more real and alive, and God became bigger and closer.

My first experience of the Holy Spirit's gifts came when I was in Hamilton for my first job after university. My mother came up for Christmas and I knew she would want to go to church on Christmas day, being a good C and E Christian (attending Christmas and Easter if not so much other times). We duly went to the local church, but I noticed it seemed quite different in feel to my local church at home.

I went back and started to go to home group and attended morning and night. Morning was fairly normal, with some more modern songs than I had been used to, which I approved of, but the evening service was quite different with prayers and the expectation that the Holy Spirit would speak to people in tongues that could be interpreted or in English that we could all understand immediately. People prayed for each other and expected things to change.

I had heard of the Holy Spirit. (My mother might not attend church herself all that often, but I had to go.) I had asked my Sunday school teacher who the Holy Spirit was. God the Father and Jesus, I was pretty clear about, but the Holy Spirit was just listed in the Trinity and nothing more.

Here, in this church, the Holy Spirit was present and active. I attended a Life in the Spirit series of teachings, and, in due course, I was prayed for and received the gift of tongues. More recently we now have the Alpha course that teaches people about the Christian faith and, also, has a time for pray for gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In various churches that I have attended there has been time for prayer for others in various ways, some incorporating the more public gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues and prophecy.

Each year I go to New Wine where I am part of the prayer team and I have seen people's lives changed.

For the disciples Pentecost was the time when all the teaching and example of Jesus came to fruition in their own ministries. They might not have realised that they had done a three-year hands-on discipleship course with Jesus but now that Jesus was no longer with them in physical form, the Holy Spirit filled them, and they responded by going out and spreading the good news.

Their first impulse was to let everyone know and get them to participate and receive the Holy Spirit as well.

They started the day with about 120 people and finished it with 3000. That was just the beginning. Each day they were at the Temple teaching. People brought their sick so that even Peter's shadow could fall on them and they would be healed (Acts 5:15).

The authorities tried to stop them, beat them and threw them in jail, angels released them, eventually Stephen was stoned to death but that only spread them out throughout the empire.

Today the Holy Spirit is present and alive and active but only if we allow him to be. The Holy Spirit will only go where he is welcomed. The disciples were waiting expectantly. And the Holy Spirit came and still comes today.

A liturgical meditation based on the statement of Metropolitan Ignatius of Latakia at a World Council of Churches Assembly reads:

Without the Holy Spirit

Christ stays in the past

The Gospel is a dead letter

The Church is simply an organisation

Authority is a matter of domination

Mission is a matter of propaganda

The Liturgy is no more than an evocation

And Christian living is a slave morality

But in the Holy Spirit

The cosmos is resurrected and groans with the birth pangs of the Kingdom.

The Risen Christ is here.

Alleluia

The Gospel is the power of life

Alleluia

The Church shows forth the life of the Trinity

Alleluia

Authority is a service that sets people free

Alleluia

Mission is Pentecost

Alleluia

The liturgy is both memorial and anticipation

Alleluia

And human action is deified

Alleluia

To sum up, Kallistos Ware writes:

An all-important lesson upon the spiritual Way is understanding how to unclench our fists and to open our hands. Each hour and minute...invisibly we are to lift our open hands to heaven, saying to the Spirit, *Come*. The whole aim of the Christian life is to be a Spirit-bearer, to live in the Spirit of God, to breathe the Spirit of God.