



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Day of Pentecost-Whit Sunday

**Acts. 2. 1-21**

**John. 15. 26-27.16.4b-15**

When I was young I remember looking forward to the Whitsun holiday. Apparently in medieval times villeins actually got a week off this week. The Whitsun holiday lasted till about 1971. Now it has been replaced by Spring Bank Holiday. The Day of Pentecost is still referred to as Whit Sunday. I had always thought that this shortening of the word white was because white vestments were traditionally worn on Pentecost Sunday – but I thought there must be more to it than this. Now of course red is worn to symbolise the flames of the Holy Spirit. It appears that the origin of the name isn't that clear. One idea was that white garments were worn by those who were to be baptised on that day. Another was that actually it was because the Holy Spirit brought wisdom to the disciples on that day – so the origin would be similar to our word wit.

The Jewish feast of Pentecost fell fifty days after the feast of Passover and as with Passover; every male Jew within twenty miles of Jerusalem was required to attend. Of course many more would make the journey so as with Passover, the city would be crowded with people. This explains the crowds from all sorts of places in the passage from Acts.

Pentecost was what we might call a harvest festival, it was also known as the 'Feast of Weeks.' Pentecost marked the gathering of harvest and so two barley loaves were offered in gratitude to God. It was also a day of rest. At Pentecost a farmer would bring the first sheaf of his harvest as an offering to God. It was indeed an offering of the first fruits in that sense however it was more than that. Fifty days after Passover at Pentecost Moses had given God's rule of life, his Ten Commandments to the Israelites. Therefore Passover and Pentecost to the Jews were inextricably linked by the Exodus. To Christians of course they are inextricably linked too. It was at Passover that Jesus was killed and then rose to new life on the first day of the new week. It was at Pentecost that he sent the Holy Spirit.

Our gospel passage is once more from the 'Farewell Discourse,' we are back in chapter 16 of John's gospel. Jesus has taught the disciples that he is 'the true vine,' he has given them his new commandment that they are to 'love one another as I have loved you.' He issues a warning to them that they are going to face persecution. We saw last week how Jesus prayed to his Father for

protection for them. Jesus will soon no longer be with them so he is committing them to his Father's care. Prior to our passage for today Jesus had made the situation quite clear, John 15.23

<sup>23</sup> 'Whoever hates me hates my Father also. <sup>24</sup>If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sinned. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. <sup>25</sup>It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, "They hated me without a cause.'

The point is that if Jesus had not come to the Jews, if he had not brought the good news of God they would not be blameworthy, they would not be sinners – they have no excuse now. They did hear his testimony; they did see his 'works.' Here was the long awaited Messiah. What did they do, they not only rejected him they had him killed. Jesus' knew that this would happen. It is put so well in John 1.

<sup>11</sup> 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.'

If they hated Jesus then they would hate his followers too. The disciples will soon be without Jesus in a hostile world. That is too much for them to face alone but that is exactly the point, they will not be alone.

<sup>26</sup> 'When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. <sup>27</sup>You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.'

It is the coming of the Holy Spirit which will continue the turnaround for the disciples begun at the resurrection. They will literally be a new creation because they have been strengthened by the 'power from on high.' The disciples have been with Jesus from the beginning. It is important for the choosing of the replacement for Judas as we saw last week. They must be able to witness to the resurrection because they have seen it. At the moment the eleven are still confused but gradually things will become clear. That is not only because of the resurrection but the enlightening of the Holy Spirit. They will receive the wisdom or wit from God.

'I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. <sup>5</sup>But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" <sup>6</sup> but because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. '

Because Jesus has told them he will be leaving them 'sorrow has filled their hearts.' I should think fear did too. However Jesus is clear in his explanation. Unless he leaves them the Advocate will not come. We are used to thinking of the Holy Spirit as the one who infuses the disciples and those early followers with power-in other words with the authorisation of God- of course that is true, that is why they are able to do wonderful works in Jesus' name. We don't often use the word Advocate though. An advocate in a court of law is one who represents you – one who speaks for you, one who seeks justice for you. Justice is central to this passage. That is God's justice, in the sense of righting the wrong. He is the God of the widow, the orphan and the poor; he is the voice of the voiceless against the oppressor. Think of these words from the Magnificat.

<sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.'

Jesus has taught God's truth-he has been rejected but not by all,

<sup>12</sup>'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,' John 1.

The Advocate will defend the disciples; he will prove the 'world', i.e. those who reject the message of God, wrong and therefore sinful. Also evil or 'the ruler of this world' has been condemned. Jesus stands against evil, he offers another way; the way of justice, truth and love; he offers God's way. Anyone therefore who rejects him and now his messengers the disciples, rejects God. Jesus says in chapter 17 that he is with the Father and the disciples are in him' they then are part of the family of the God of love. I said last week we, the followers of Jesus, are part of that community of love too and that we should reflect it in our communities.

Jesus will bring God's justice and his triumph over the powers of evil will be seen at Calvary and at his resurrection. Jesus triumphs over evil once and for all. He is bringing about God's new creation. At the moment the disciples do not fully understand – how could they? In a few verses they will show this, in answer to Jesus words,

'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.' <sup>17</sup>Then some of his disciples said to one another, 'What does he mean by saying to us, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"; and "Because I am going to the Father"?' <sup>18</sup>They said, 'What does he mean by this "a little while"? We do not know what he is talking about.'

They simply do not understand fully but they will. The Holy Spirit will bring the 'wisdom from on high.'

<sup>13</sup> 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.'

They will be guided in all truth. They will be transformed; they will understand fully just who Jesus is. That enables them to speak out in witness.

<sup>14</sup>'He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Their understanding has been tentative but with the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit they will see clearly. They in turn have a responsibility; to live out their lives in the service of Jesus, to take out his word, the word of God to the world, as it says at the end of Matthew's gospel chapter 28.

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

They will never be alone in their 'great commission.' think of those words from Mark 13.

<sup>11</sup>'When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.'

That is a huge promise and in Acts we will see the truth of Jesus' words again and again. It is strange to think that a few hours after Jesus spoke these words to his disciples they all ran away or like Peter stayed only to deny him. But none of them except Judas will be lost. They will all return. Remember it is Mary who stands at the foot of the cross with the other women and John. They are at that time broken men and women. Soon however they experience the wonder of the resurrection and have Jesus' promise and instruction

<sup>48</sup> 'You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Our reading from Acts of course describes this moment. The reading begins, 'When the day of Pentecost had come.' We remember that to the Jews Passover and Pentecost were inextricably linked. At Pentecost the Israelites received the Law from God. It was their guide line to a new way of life to be lived in his way. Now in exactly the same way the Holy Spirit of God is sent to continue God's new creation, God's new way begun in Jesus. Jesus has said,

<sup>7</sup>'Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. '

The sending of the Holy Spirit is then linked absolutely to Jesus' return to his Father at the ascension. He is lifted up to heaven and the power will come from on high, the power of God sent by Jesus the Christ.

The other thing that Luke stresses immediately is that, 'they were all together in one place.' Here are the believers in community – not just the disciples but the closest followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon them all – think back to the reading we looked at concerning Cornelius, his family and friends. Peter and the Jewish converts with him saw the Spirit come upon them all. For that reason nothing could hinder their baptism. Community not individualism is stressed again and again.

This is a momentous occurrence; it is something new. The Spirit is described specifically in terms of the sound of a 'mighty wind' which filled the house, then tongues as of fire rested on each one of them. It reminded me of 1 Kings 19. 11. and Elijah's encounter with God in the cave.

'Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. '

It is then that he hears God's voice.

The Holy Spirit came in the rushing mighty wind and tongues of flame at that Pentecost. But we need to remember that God's Holy Spirit comes in many ways. Sometimes it is in the 'still small voice of calm' that we experience the Holy Spirit and the strength of God's love in our hearts and minds. Think back to the gospel passage; to those disciples, just ordinary men who were puzzled by Jesus' words, who were saddened and yes frightened at what he was saying about leaving them. Think of how they ran away at the arrest and only Peter followed only to fall at the first hurdle but as I said before only Judas was lost, they came together again in that room with the other followers. They had lived through Jesus' resurrection appearances. They had seen the ascension, now they waited. It is at this moment with the coming of the 'power from on high' that they are to experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

If you think about the passages we have already looked at from Acts that transformation is so clear. One example is Peter and John before Annas and Caiaphas,

<sup>13</sup> 'Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus.'

The point is that these 'ordinary men', uneducated as they were, have been completely changed. They speak with boldness yes – but also with the wisdom the Holy Spirit has given them. Accepting the way of Jesus should be life changing.

The first signs we see here in our passage for today is that they speak in other languages. They are speaking in other tongues, not of their own volition but 'as the Spirit gave them utterance.' There are a few points to stress here. Certainly one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the ability to speak in



tongues. Some people can do so others cannot; it is one example of God's gifts from the Spirit. The Holy Spirit manifests itself in many ways.

These followers, previously frightened and confused men and women are transformed now. Firstly they are strengthened; they are emboldened to go out; but most importantly they have the power and authorisation of God. Of their own power they can do nothing. They are empowered and speak and act in the name of Jesus Christ. There are many, many people in Jerusalem and a great crowd gathers as the disciples speak. Here we are told the disciples speak in tongues and the people in the crowd recognise their own languages. The people in the crowd can understand what the disciples are saying. It is an important point that people from all nationalities can understand them. That signifies the fact that the word of God is for all people, it is universal. All are invited to the 'wedding banquet' of God. Of course the people who are in Jerusalem for Pentecost would be converts to Judaism because they had come to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost however the point still holds true. The good news of God is for the entire world.

Peter, once again the leader, speaks boldly to the crowd dismissing the scoffing of a few he gets straight to witness. He quotes from Joel 2. 28-32. He does not speak of Jesus at first. That seems strange. The point is that he is recounting signs of the last days when the new age of God would come to fruition. All through Jewish history the faithful have waited for the time when God's anointed, the chosen one, the Messiah of the line of the great King David would come to save his chosen people. The Messiah would rule not just Israel but the whole world and would usher in God's new creation!

Well says Peter, now that time has come and it has come in Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. After our passage finishes Peter continues by teaching the crowd of Jesus. He goes straight to the heart of the matter to the crucifixion and resurrection.

<sup>22</sup> 'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— <sup>23</sup>this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.'

Peter begins the mission on the day of Pentecost which is their commission forever as it is every Christian's.

<sup>36</sup>'Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.'<sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' <sup>38</sup>Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

He tells the crowd that they need to, 'Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.' Peter makes it clear that the good news is for all humanity, anyone can turn to Jesus there are no bars to being a Christian, all are welcome.

Luke completes this account by telling the reader that three thousand became 'followers of the way' that day. The first apostles do what Jesus' commanded, they 'break bread and devote themselves to prayer.'

The story of Pentecost is wonderful in itself but it is wonderful for us now and for every Christian down the ages. I always say at a baptism that the same Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan is present in that service. It always fills me with awe. We know that at certain

times the Holy Spirit is called down, at a confirmation or ordination. Indeed at the Holy Communion the priest says words such as 'send your Holy Spirit that broken bread and wine outpoured may be for us the body and blood of your dear Son.'

But we also know that our God is a God of community, three in one in a community of love. God's Holy Spirit is with us now. Whether we feel the rushing mighty wind or the still small voice we trust God is near to us at all times.

We say in our creed 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.' God's Holy Spirit is a life giving force. God is with us, we are not alone ever.

*'Come holy Ghost our souls inspire.'* John Cosin

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