

Sermon for Online Service: Pott Shrigley 31 May 2020. Rev David Swales

Acts 2.1-13 *Pentecost: the Holy Spirit comes*

[The sermon begins with two visual aids; a fan, with streamers, depicting wind, and a coloured card, depicting tongues of flame]

I recently recorded a talk about Pentecost for our friends at Pott Shrigley School, and I couldn't resist sharing the wind and fire from that talk with you today.

Pentecost, of course, is the day when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit to the first disciples. It's a wonderful story – we just heard the first part of it, read by Rebecca. And, of course, that same Holy Spirit wants to come to you, and to me.

And yet it sometimes seems that, ever since that first day, some have been confused, disturbed, even divided, by their understanding of the Holy Spirit. So let's look again at the story: it will help us to understand.

The story, in fact, starts well before the day of Pentecost itself. During the disciples' time with Jesus, He promised several times that He and His Father would one day send them the Holy Spirit – the Helper, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth. Fast forward to the Ascension, which we remembered two weeks ago: as the disciples see Jesus for the last time, He has some final words for them. Firstly, an instruction, a command: 'Go into all the world', He says, 'and tell the Good News about me'. But then, also, a repeat of His promise that the Holy Spirit would come to them, and would fill them with His power. In fact, said Jesus, you won't be able to have one without the other – you won't be able to tell the world about me, without the Spirit's power in you. So, however tempted you might be to run off and make a start straight away, I'm telling you to wait: to go back home, and wait for the Spirit to come.

Maybe we have an inkling of what that waiting was like for the disciples. My diary is full of things which I was going to be doing just now; things which I would like to be doing; things which I feel like I *ought* to be doing – doing for God. And instead I am being made to wait: to wait until the time comes that I *can* do them. When we are waiting, instead of doing, we can feel frustrated, useless, even guilty. And yet, here is Jesus actually *commanding* them to wait. Waiting has a proper place in the life of the Christian – even, or especially, in the life of the Christian who is keen to be active, serving God. I hope we can find God's purpose in this time of waiting – both in our own lives, and also in the life

of our church. Let's make this a time of 'waiting on God', learning to enjoy his presence, to know his will, to receive his grace.

But, back to the story. And, 10 days later, on the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival, we find the disciples gathered in one room; we're not told precisely what they are doing, but I'm sure their waiting involves talking together about Jesus' parting words and what they meant, perhaps discussing what might lie ahead, and, most of all, praying. But whatever they are doing at that moment, it is interrupted by the sound of a powerful wind, and the sight of tongues of flame above the head of each one in the group.

A dramatic experience, certainly: but this is not mere fireworks. There is meaning in the signs which accompany the arrival of the Spirit. Like those disciples who were fishermen, you may have experienced the surge of energy when the wind fills the sails in your boat; or perhaps you've been physically beaten back by the heat from a large fire. The wind and the fire are signs of power; God's power. And, indeed, that power is immediately at work: the disciples find themselves filled with an urge to spill out into the street and to tell any who will listen the good news of Jesus – and the Spirit gives them the power to do so with boldness and, on this occasion at least, a supernatural ability to be understood by hearers whose languages they couldn't know. From that day to this, ordinary, weak people, like you and me, have been able to do extraordinary things for God, empowered by His Holy Spirit.

But there was more for them – and for us - to learn about the meaning of the wind and the flame. As time went on those first Christians would find that the Holy Spirit's power was not just to be at work *through* them – helping them to do God's work: it was to be at work *in* them; changing them; blowing the cobwebs away from the dark and dusty corners of their souls; burning off impurities in their character. Like the elemental forces of wind and fire, the Holy Spirit changes everything – everyone – He touches: and change, however positive and necessary, can sometimes be painful.

Pentecost was the exciting start of a whole new life for the disciples: may it be so for you and for me, too.