

The Day of Pentecost

Today is one of those great days of Christian celebration. Like Christmas and Easter, the Day of Pentecost focuses our attention on God himself, who he is and what he's done.

We recall the pouring out of God the Holy Spirit on that small group of frightened, tongue-tied men and women who were to become the core of the Christian Church. This was the very human group that was propelled to the very edges of the known world with the life changing message of Jesus Christ. They were vitalised by the Holy Spirit, changed by the Holy Spirit, guided by the Holy Spirit, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, gifted by the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit and used by the Holy Spirit.

Today's Epistle reading from Acts chapter 2 is one of the most important passages in the New Testament. It marks the start of the new era in God's plans and purposes for the human race and human history. It helps us understand who the Holy Spirit is and what the Holy Spirit does. It has been called 'God's Sound and Light Show'.

On the morning of the Day of Pentecost, in the year of our Lord's death and resurrection, the house where the disciples were sitting together was suddenly filled with what sounded like a gale of wind from heaven. Luke struggles with words as he attempts to describe just what happened when the Spirit came. 'Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting', (verse 2). Imagine the sound only of a very strong wind, a cyclone, howling. No doors banging – just the sound of the wind. Eerie!

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Now the disciples knew that 'wind' was a symbol of the Spirit of God. It spoke of God's life-giving power and renewing energy.

In his vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, Ezekiel hears God tell him to speak to 'the wind' and command it to breathe into the bones to bring them back to life (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

In John's Gospel, chapter 3, we are told, 'The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going to. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' The Spirit brings life, spiritual life. He is the life force of God. He makes us alive to God. He breathes life into what is lifeless.

So the sound was the wind that spoke to them of the Spirit of God coming in power, life giving, renewing power.

When did you last think about the power of God in your life? Maybe you never have.

Do you experience God's power in times of worship? Or do these times just sort of pass us by? Maybe we get nothing out of it. It's just a routine we go through. And at the end we wonder what it was all about. Or are our times of worship the highlight of our whole week, when we come together with God's people to praise and worship him, to learn more about him, to pray to him and to grow in our knowledge, love, faith and obedience? Then we go out renewed and revitalised.

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Maybe the question should be, 'Are you excited about being a Christian, being loved by God so much that he sent his Son to die for you on the cross?' Does that motivate you to share his wonderful love with others and tell them how they can experience that too?

If your answers indicate you are dissatisfied with your spiritual life at present, then this Sunday pray that the Holy Spirit will come afresh and fill you with spiritual life, make you alive to God, set a song in your heart and become aware of his work in your life. We all need the wind of God's Spirit to renew our spiritual lives.

If the first symbol of God's Spirit was the sound of wind, then the second symbol was fire. Tongues of fire speak of the purifying work of a Holy God. 'They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each one of them' (verse 3). The symbol of fire.

The important Old Testament passage here is Isaiah chapter 6, where the prophet is given a vision of God himself in all his glory.

The overwhelming sense was of God's beautiful, awesome holiness.

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.' (Isaiah 6:3). And Isaiah becomes acutely aware of his own sinfulness and utter unworthiness as he catches this sight of the holiness of God. 'Woe is me!', I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.' (verse 5)

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But what happens then? How does God, who has shown Isaiah his holiness, deal with the prophet's sinfulness? By banishing him from his presence? No! Not at all! He purifies him so he is able to stay and enjoy, and go and serve. 'Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for".' (verses 6 and 7). This was the purifying work of the Holy God.

And now at Pentecost this same process is at work. The Spirit who comes to them is God's Holy Spirit. He comes with power absolutely. But he comes purifying as well. Burning away all that is sinful, cleansing out what is wrong and putting the finger on evil that must be removed and overcome.

This fire is the symbol of the purifying work of God.

That work of the Holy Spirit is still the same today. When the Spirit makes us alive to God, he will finger those parts of our lives that need to be changed – those attitudes, those behaviours, those weaknesses, those failures in relationships. And he will replace them with new, fresh and wholesome ones.

The Holy Spirit purifies us so we become more like Jesus Christ, more open to God's love, more aware of God's strength and leading and more useful in God's service.

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Someone once said, 'The biblical images to describe the work of the Spirit, fire, mighty rushing wind, are exactly the sort of things we pay to insure ourselves against.' In earthly terms we see them as things that cause harm, but in spiritual terms they are beneficial. When we open ourselves fully to God's Holy Spirit things will happen, things will change and things will move. If you want to stay where you are, don't pray for the Holy Spirit! He will disturb things. He will change your life.

So the first symbol is wind - renewing power.

The second symbol is fire - purifying our sin.

And the third phenomena is the outburst of different languages. It speaks to us of the universality of the Christian Church.

'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.' (verse 4) And the crowd in Jerusalem, made up of people from all over the Mediterranean world heard in their own languages the wonders of God. 'Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in their own language. Utterly amazed they asked, "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?...What does this mean?" ' (verses 5-7,10).

It was an international crowd. They spoke many languages and represented many cultures. And they were puzzled, 'What does this mean?'

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And that's a good question for us too. What does this mean? What is happening here? What are the consequences of the Holy Spirit coming on the church?

It shows that with the coming of the Spirit there is a new unity that crosses all the barriers of race, nationality, culture and language. Here in the crowd there were representatives from 'every nation under heaven.' They all heard the wonders of God in their own language.

In fact what happened at Pentecost is the exact reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament, when human languages were confused and the nations scattered. (Genesis 11:1-9). But now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, all these nations heard the wonders of God in their own language. Hearing the Gospel in your own heart language means this is for you!

The Kingdom of God is multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-racial and multi-national. It does not belong to one culture, one language group, one race or one nation. It is for all. It is open to everyone no matter what their background. And so our final question is, 'What does this mean for us?'