

Worship for Sunday May 31st 2020 at 10.30 am
Bingley, Idle and Headingley St. Columba's United Reformed Churches
Separately yet Together

Lectionary Readings Psalm 104, 24-34,35b: 1 Corinthians 12, 3b- 13 Acts 2. 1-21; John 7 v 37-39

Call to Worship

We come together, separately in our own homes,
united by our faith in our creator God,
And whose presence is with each one of us.
Through our risen Christ we are drawn into God's love.
We ask that each of us will be empowered by the Holy Spirit
To inspire and enrich this time together.

We commence that worship with a hymn to read or sing -

Hymn - O Thou Who Camest From Above

Prayers and Lord's Prayer

We gather in our own homes in the name of Jesus on this the Day of Pentecost
to worship in the power of the Spirit.

We bring our gift of prayerfulness and listening
May our gifts be united to honour you,
May each of us receive from you that which we need.

We pray that you will endow us with patience and perseverance
To find contentment in this when our usual routines and pleasures are restricted.
We thank you for our friends and families, blessings that so often we take for granted.
Help us to have, from this experience, more care and concern for those who never see family,
For those who have no family to see, for those who are permanently alone.
We pray for all who seek to comfort them.
We pray for all who work to attend to the health and wellbeing of our communities.

We come to you with all our differences, with all our hopes and dreams.
We pray that in the midst of all our plans and aspirations
We will allow You to be at the very centre of our lives,
For through You we will find true fulfilment and joy.

We thank you Father God that your love is unconditional;
your gifts are offered with measureless generosity;
your peace is all-encompassing.
We are sorry for times
when we have put conditions on our willingness to care;
when we have kept what we have for ourselves and refused to share with others;
when we have failed to seek peace and have caused discord.
Forgive us; restore us; renew us by your Spirit of life.
We will always praise you.
Father, Son and Spirit.

Amen.

We ask all these our prayers in the name of Jesus who taught us when we pray to say
Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us
this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into
temptation, But deliver us from evil, For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory For ever and ever. **Amen.**

Introduction to the themes

So here we are! Pentecost Sunday. The climax of the Jesus story. The Church Birthday. A day of celebration.

In my home town, Oldham, and I think in other towns in the north of England, Whit Sunday was a day of processions and new clothes and much excitement and the following day, Whit Monday, when I was a child, it was a bus or train to Manchester to watch the great parades of the Roman Catholic Churches and then at the end of the week on Whit Friday it was up to Saddleworth to see the parades there and then the Brass Band Competition.

As a teenager Whit Monday became a visit to Cliff College, the Methodist Training College for evangelists where there were outdoor services and marquees for the hundreds of people who arrived to celebrate Pentecost. It's a great day!

The story of the day is well known, but it's like anything else that's familiar – it's not quite that familiarity breeds contempt – it's just that we always know the outcomes – over the years we've absorbed it all and the element of surprise now usually evades us.

The trouble is we tend to read the gospel story in bits – which never quite gives us the extraordinary thrilling quality of the events which lead over and over again from crisis to climax, every one of them building up the whole story of astonishing events.

If we try again, as we did briefly last week, to look back on the whole story, a thirty odd year saga from the birth in Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt and then that a long period of childhood, adolescence and youth of which we know almost nothing except the story of that pilgrimage to Jerusalem where Joseph and Mary lose their son and find Him talking with the teachers in the Temple.

There must have been many years growing into manhood, following his father into the family trade, and becoming a Carpenter, until with the advent of John the Baptist He goes to be baptised in the River Jordan and then seeks quiet and solitude in the desert to work out what exactly He is called to do and how to achieve that which is planned for Him.

So, it is just in the final three years of His life into which so many things are crammed. Three years in the company of the men he has chosen, or, as he says in John 17, given to Him by God to be His disciples. His team.

Have you ever played in a sports team? Think about what the team tries to achieve and how they go about reaching their goals. And of course, there are many other sorts of teams of which you may have been a member.

In recent years building up the team in an office or factory or a kitchen or hospital or wherever has become very important, often groups of workers are given days off to go and take part in team building exercises. Where they learn to value each other's contribution to the functioning of the whole. These groups are encouraged to recognise that they function far more effectively if they learn to acknowledge personal talent and personal weak spots in order that together they achieve more.

We might not always call them 'teams', but there are other kinds of 'teams. A couple in partnership or marriage or a family often if they are functioning properly work as a team, each contributing their skills and allowing the other to compensate for their weaknesses

When I worked in a residential school for difficult girls one of the themes of our work was for the girls to learn to acknowledge their inter-dependency. On one occasion a delivery van who was bringing supplies for some sort of outdoor event we were holding in the grounds delivered on a particularly wet day and his vehicle got stuck in the mud. It was all hands to the task.

Our 30 teenage girls, some of whom who looked as though a gust of wind might blow them away, and all the teaching staff all got behind the lorry and after some heaving and straining and judicious use of twigs and branches under the wheels, what seemed an impossible task was accomplished and a lot of very pleased youngsters were excused school for the rest of the morning while they all trotted back to their

rooms having shed their grotesquely muddied shoes and socks at the back door to go get showered and changed.

For most of my life I've always been involved with drama groups – having directed my first play, “Cinderella” in the second year of Infant school. I played Cinderella as well as telling everyone else what they had to do! (How selfish was that!) I think it was a few years before it dawned upon me the absolute need to share the tasks so that everyone from the stage cleaner to the lead role is part of the team. All valued – all contributing something specific to the whole. The loss of any one person of that team can be catastrophic.

I was once involved in a production, when during the final performance week, which took place in a local school followed by a short run at a professional theatre some 20 odd miles away, the father of one of the leads committed suicide in the most awful manner and the male lead who was due to get married in the weekend following the show was informed by his future bride that she had changed her mind. Two totally devastating set of circumstances. As a small amateur company there were no understudies desperate to take the roles. All the rest of the cast and crew made it clear to both of them that it was totally acceptable to everyone if we just cancelled. However, both of them decided that despite the awful circumstances they would continue with the show. What bravery! fortitude!

That's what we need in our lives as individual Christians and as a team in our churches. We need an acceptance that we contribute in different ways, according to our skills for the good of the whole. And making that commitment a priority. Not giving up when for one reason or another we decide we don't want to do that anymore. But going on for as long as we are needed and retiring gracefully when we see there is someone more able and willing to take on the task. That's the only way as Christians we can live our lives. Not allowing the most awful of circumstances to interfere with our commitment to the Lord.

Each one of us has a valuable contribution to make to the working of the whole. Each of us has talents, gifts and graces to bring to contribute generously to our communal life as the Church of God.

As we celebrate again the birthday of the church let us remember all those who have gone before and rededicate ourselves to the service of the Lord, each of us doing our 'bit' in the power of the Spirit towards fulfilment of “The Great Commission”, the task set for us all by our Lord. “Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in” - Bingley, Idle and Headingley - “and to the uttermost part of the earth”.

Hymn 329 - There's A Spirit in the Air

Bible Readings

Acts 2: 1-21

John 7: 37-39

Hymn -Come Down O Love Divine

Sermon

Have you ever been lost for words? Perhaps when you have encountered some amazing sight that has taken your breath – and your words away and you are so moved emotionally that all you can do is stand in awe and wonder. We often say of some incident – I was speechless. Think of those moments as you encounter this story.

In the previous chapter Luke has described the Ascension when Jesus had commanded the eleven disciples to stay in the city. Luke tells us that they had stayed together and also assembled together with the other followers of Jesus, who at that time according to Luke were about a hundred and twenty.

In one gathering Peter informs them of the death of Judas Iscariot, although, interestingly, Luke does not record his name. Perhaps Peter didn't either, maybe at that point his name had become so reviled they could not bear to speak it.

Whatever. They decided that someone should be elected to make up the number of the disciples to twelve. Twelve was a significant number in their society- a reminder of the twelve tribes of Israel. Two men were chosen from the hundred and twenty to be nominated to be a disciple to be a witness to the life, work, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus in Judas' place and after prayer they draw lots and Matthias was elected to become one of the disciples.

So, they were awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised. They had no idea what was to come nor when it was to happen. There must have been much discussion about what and when to expect. They must have been wondering if it had already happened and they hadn't noticed it. Or if it had happened to the others and they had been missed. Of course when the Spirit arrived on the day of Pentecost the experience was such that they could not have mistaken what happened and it happened to them all at the same time.

Pentecost is a Jewish Feast Day that occurs on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan, 50 days after the Passover, and has a double significance. It marked the all-important wheat harvest in the Land of Israel (Exodus 34:22) and it commemorates the anniversary of the day when God gave the Torah to the nation of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai.

It was a time when so many Jewish pilgrims from all over the known world assembled in Jerusalem to celebrate the day. Farmers brought the first fruits of their harvest in to the city. One of the rituals associated with the day was the collection of a bowl of water from the Pool of Siloam to be presented at the altar in the Temple.

Look again at the writing in the section from Acts Chapter 2. Here Luke is trying to describe the indescribable, the scene in Jerusalem at Pentecost as the disciples received the Holy Spirit and the promises Jesus had made are honoured. In verses 1-3, he describes the events of that Pentecost and then then from v. 4 onwards he goes on to describe the meaning of Pentecost.

The disciples were all together "with one accord" – friends, companions and co-workers of Jesus. There was unity amongst them, when, honouring the promise which Jesus made - His promise not to leave the disciples comfortless – the Holy Spirit arrives. It is an amazing spiritual moment. The arrival of power. Luke describes it in terms of power sources that were familiar to him and to the disciples, presumably recounting the story of the event as told to him by the disciples. They speak of Wind. Fire. Living flames.

Luke uses the Hebrew and Greek words – wind, spirit, breath.

Wind indicative of an unseen power. Remember Christina Rossetti's Poem?

*Who has seen the wind? Neither I nor you, But when the leaves hang trembling the wind is passing through.
Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I, but when the trees bow down their heads the wind is passing by.*

The power of the wind cannot be seen we only recognise its presence by the noise it creates and by the effects that it has.

Fire – fire burns, it destroys, but it cleanses. It is used in the refining of metal. Heating to burn away the dross, the rubbish and to refine the finest of metals, iron, bronze, gold and silver. The suggestion here is that the fire symbolises the destroying of all the human failings in these men that they may be purified to be fit for the service of the King of Kings.

Whilst the Holy Spirit is described as 'wind' and 'fire' in Acts. In the passage we read from John, Jesus uses the analogy of water. All three of these elements can be unpredictable, disruptive and hard to control. Those who experienced what was taking place in Jerusalem were astonished. They had no inkling of what the Holy Spirit's arrival predicted by the prophet Joel and Jesus would entail.

Whatever else the Holy Spirit does it comes to renew and fill the life of the Christian believer with the power of God. It is an Indwelling Spirit, to enable the Christian believer to be Inspired and enabled to live a life of dedicated discipleship and service. It cannot be experienced at second hand – it is a personal

experience. In the case of the Holy Spirit it isn't possible to warm oneself at someone else's fire. It is a personal transformation, as the subsequent activities of the disciples prove.

In the analogy of the wind we see how powerful that Indwelling Spirit can be. The disciples, the first disciples and Jesus' disciples down through the ages are changed from being ordinary to being extraordinary.

"For none can guess its grace till (s)he becomes a place where in the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling"

The Spirit is an Initiating Spirit. The power of the Spirit isn't passive it compels action. As soon as the disciples received the gift, they didn't stand around congratulating each other and continuing in their holy huddle. They went out to tell, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. They began to share their faith, to preach the gospel "as the Spirit gave them utterance." No loss of words here. They are empowered.

If one simple word sums up this event and subsequent events chronicled in Acts and in the experiences of Jesus followers down the centuries it might be "out". No more sorrowful fearful hiding indoors. They went out. They spoke out, boldly and loudly. No more loss of words or fear of not knowing what to say. No shame. No hesitation. They were imbued with certainty that Jesus was Lord, He had conquered Death and He had with the coming of His Spirit equipped them to begin the task of preaching the message to all the peoples of the world.

Peter, who preached what was arguably the first sermon, used the Scriptures to explain what was taking place. He and the other disciples were utterly transformed. Transformation - means complete and utter change. What connotations does the word have for you?

Often pantomimes have a Transformation Scene where the powers of goodness, usually symbolised by fairies are assembled together and begin to take over the story so that the forces of evil, represented in such characters as King Rat, the wicked Uncle, the Ugly Sister or whatever, may be defeated.

A few years ago, I had in my garden of the house that I moved into some 25 years ago, a huge solo privet. It was horrendous. It was large it took the light from one corner of the garden where it had been allowed to grow into an unpruned and rampant monstrosity and I determined that at some point I should get a gardener to cut it down. As far as I was concerned it was an eye sore.

One day I discovered that it had flowered. It was covered in white, heavily perfumed blossom. As I came home from work that evening on a glorious summer day, as I walked towards the tree it apparently erupted. The flowers, at least at least I thought they were flowers, rose in a great cloud. It was an astonishing sight. It took me a moment to realise that it was a cloud of cabbage white butterflies which had come to rest and gorge themselves on the flowers on the tree. As I backed away the cloud resettled on the tree which was utterly transformed. No longer was it hideous. It was stunningly, amazingly beautiful.

On the Day of Pentecost, with the transformation of the disciples, the entire mission of the church was initiated. And the mission of renewal and revival at any time down the succeeding centuries since is only achieved when the power of the Spirit is at work.

In verse 11, Luke tries to summarise the effects of preaching to the crowds of people outside, people drawn to Jerusalem for the Festival. It is reckoned that there were 14 or 15 different cultural groups there who all heard Peter preach, but astonishingly each heard him preach in their own language. Those who heard the believers speaking in 'other languages' were from every part of the known world of the time. It was a clear sign of the Holy Spirit's unifying power - bringing together people from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities.

No wonder they were all astonished. So, the Holy Spirit is not only Indwelling, it is not only an Initiating Spirit that directs the work of mission, it is also an Interpreting Spirit.

Remember the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis? It is the story of how the people were scattered because they were separated by barriers of language but now (by the power of the Holy Spirit), what was being said, astonishingly, could be recognised by everyone.

The cause of this phenomenon was not for everyone a sign of the presence of God. There were many in the crowd who were able to comprehend the words, but not accept the miraculous nature of what was happening, and argued that the only 'spirit' present was of an alcoholic nature.

All preaching is used by the Holy Spirit to speak to individuals, but as always the choice to believe or not is a personal choice, The Holy Spirit may speak through the preacher, but the final decision to believe is still the prerogative of the hearer. There is always a choice. God does not compel us to accept Him, He has given us that freedom. Listening is not sufficient. We have to understand what God is saying to us and accept or reject the Gospel message

In 2020 whilst we might extol the merits of having diverse congregations in our churches, in practice many local congregations struggle to make the ideal of unity and equality a reality. What is it that holds us back, are there ways we might find to overcome such barriers? Have we got any ideas, led by the Spirit of how can we work to ensure our churches are as inclusive and unified as possible?

One of the results of the lock down and the closure of Churches has meant that many church groups have been using on-line methods of sharing worship, Bible Studies, Discussion groups and Junior Church worship. A wonderful unintended consequence of this has been that many people, lapsed Church goers and the unchurched have shared in these broadcasts. They have been able to join in without the anxiety that many people feel, of going into a church which for them is an unfamiliar place and way out of their comfort zone.

Many viewers may have been motivated by the need to pray for sick loved ones or for the protection of those working in close contact with the virus, there may be those who are seeking comfort in bereavement. Whatever the reasons for people seeking out such programmes, it would seem that in this time the Holy spirit has been at work and we can only pray that the opportunity this awful virus has created, will be used to bring more outsiders into the church when our churches are open again.

Pentecost witnessed God moving in a new, dynamic way in the lives of those who believed. When God chooses to do a similar thing in our own churches let us pray that we are not as sceptical or dismissive as those naysayers in Jerusalem.

Pentecost, tells of when the Holy Spirit filled all those gathered people. They spoke in their own voices and languages and were put right with God through Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit of God. The central message of Pentecost was the conviction that all people are beloved of God, all people are redeemed in Jesus, and all people, all people, are welcome in God's Kingdom.

Can we learn from this? Can we hold up a hope of heaven that welcomes everyone? Can we believe in a God that big?

In this time, we need God's healing grace. We need a Pentecost to inspire us all, to enable us to believe that God is good enough, big enough, generous enough, to make a place for each and every person in the Kingdom of God. A place for you and me.

Before the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples they were well meaning, well intentioned, incompetent and bumbling failures. Just like you and me. But when they had received the Holy Spirit they were transformed. They had power, dynamism, charisma, they changed the world. And the promise to you and I is that we can have that Spirit too. **Amen**

Let us pray

Father God, we pray that each one of us may be imbued with the Power of your Holy Spirit that we may go out to be witnesses to your forgiveness, love and care to all those whom we meet. That we may lead others, as we have been led, into Your Kingdom.

Amen

Hymn - Holy Spirit, Truth Divine,

Intercessory Prayers

Holy Spirit of peace, we pray for homes and nations as we fight this pandemic.
Pour out your breath of truth and integrity upon national leaders,
that people may listen to each other with confidence
May we all respect each other; care for and honour each other.

Holy Spirit of hope,
we pray for those who live in despair;
For those whose lives have been blighted by illness or loss of loved ones
by the pandemic, by the hurricane.
For those who can see no purpose in their lives;
For those who cannot see a way ahead;
For those who feel completely alone..

Holy Spirit of unity, we pray for your Church,
for its ministry to the faithful;
for its mission to the world.
May the Spirit of Pentecost breathe upon all your people
That we may witness to the world telling of the comfort and love that you offer.

God of wind and dove and fire, speak freedom, peace and change
over lands divided by war and by creed.
Speak refreshment, assurance and warmth
over lives afflicted by exhaustion and illness.
Speak integrity, humility and challenge
over churches crippled by fear and finances.
Speak calm, gentleness and comfort
over lives broken by grief and loss.
Speak power, anointing and healing
over each one of us,
That there may be new beginnings,
and a catalyst for change.

God of hope, heal us and restore us
that we might know your power in our lives.
Where things seem to be one big tangle of pain and unhappiness,
Intervene with your saving love;
Where people are in conflict or locked in a stalemate,
release them from the cycle of war;
Where your name is outlawed and your children are forced to hide,
Break through their darkness and be God-revealed to them;
Where despair takes centre stage and depression and anxiety sharpen their claws,
fill those situations with unexpected peace and joy.

God of all time and of every place: may the earth be filled with the knowledge of you,
and may your light flow over the world like a covering,
bringing protection from the darkness and from the evil that often frightens and wounds us.
In the name of our Saviour we pray.

Amen.

Hymn - Lord Thy Church on Earth is seeking

A closing prayer

May the power of the Spirit challenge you.

May the peace of the Spirit comfort you.

May the presence of the Spirit enable you to live in love and service in the name of Christ.

Amen.

The Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the Love of God

and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,

be with us all, evermore.

Amen