

Acts 2, 1 to 21 Pentecost 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

How significant was Pentecost to the Christian faith and to the growth of the Christian church; a question I hope to answer in this sermon this morning.

Prior to Pentecost the Holy Spirit was not very active in human beings except for a small selection of people such as prophets Like Samuel, or Isaiah, who were dispersed over hundreds of years.

My favourite prophet of the Old Testament is Elijah who challenged the priests of Baal which the priests of Baal lived to regret, a lovely story told in 1 Kings 18, and he also restored to life a mother's son.

But these people, as our reading from St. John's gospel tells us, were not filled with the Holy Spirit, rather as Isaiah wrote "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me".

Prophets of the Old Testament were anointed by God for special tasks, whereas now, since Pentecost, every baptised Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost marked the time when the Holy Spirit descended in free fall from heaven to earth and to be active in a powerful way in the hearts of those who believe in the saving grace of our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

We are told that when the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.

And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues as of fire appeared among them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

I've often wondered about that sentence, was Luke describing precisely what happened, or was he trying to put the indescribable into words we could understand; in either event it must have been very frightening to have been literally baptised with fire, but when they realised what had happened their fear must have turned instantly to joy.

However, it wasn't that long ago that we had a reading from John chapter 20 where we were told that they were all together in the evening on the first day of the week, that is Easter Sunday.

And that the doors of their house were locked for fear of the Jews when Jesus came among them and breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit.

So was the Holy Spirit given to them in the evening of Easter Sunday, as in John 20, when Jesus breathed on them; or was it given them at Pentecost, traditionally celebrated 50 days after passover.

Interestingly, in John chapter 21 verse 3, after the meeting in the upper room on that Easter Sunday, we are told that they were at the Sea of Tiberias when Peter said I'm going fishing and the sons of Zebedee, and Thomas and Nathaniel said we're coming with you.

Now that doesn't sound like Spirit filled Christians dedicated to spreading the Good News of Christ. Also, when Jesus came alongside and asked them if they had caught anything, none of the disciples recognised him.

On that evidence I would suggest that they were not filled with the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday, but there's even more.

Jesus' primary reason for visiting the upper room on Easter Sunday was, I believe, to demonstrate to the disciples that he had in fact risen from the dead, by asking them to touch his wounds.

To tell them that they were now ready to take on the task for which they were chosen in the first place, that is, to preach the gospel of Christ, to take away any guilt they may have felt over those last few days, and finally to command them to receive the Holy Spirit when it comes.

Another reason why I think they didn't receive the Holy Spirit at that time was because Thomas wasn't there, so he would have been left out, which clearly would not have happened.

Also, it wasn't until about 4 weeks after the encounter at Easter that Jesus ascended into heaven and John 16 verses 5 to 7 reads, "I am going to him who sent me, that is Jesus going to the Father,..... It is to your advantage that I go away, the advocate, meaning the Holy Spirit, will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you".

This for me makes a lot of sense because one wouldn't send somebody to remind us what another person had said while that person was still with us.

I only mentioned this relationship between these two events because initially I was puzzled over the two accounts, and I hope that I wasn't alone and that this has helped, and hasn't spread confusion where there was no confusion before I started.

This also goes to illustrate that reading the Bible and making sense of it isn't easy for anyone, and I'm sure that we all struggle trying to understand it.

But I am also overwhelmed with joy that it isn't through being able to decipher scripture that will save us, although understanding scripture may give us more confidence in the Lord.

It's not even being good people that will save us, although in some circumstances that might help.

No, it is not those things that will save us; it's faith in the risen Christ alone that will save us.

So, it was at Pentecost that they received and were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, because their whole lives had been changed by it, as demonstrated throughout the book of Acts.

Because now after Pentecost the disciples had become effective witnesses of Christ. Now their lives had changed, no more fishing in the lake for them.

Now there was fellowship in the Lord; now they were showing Christ like characteristics in the way they lived and behaved.

Now they would not only have recognised Jesus if he returned, but they were now recognising Jesus in themselves.

Our reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles records that momentous occasion when the Holy Spirit came as a violent wind and tongues of fire.

The Holy Spirit empowered the apostles and enabled them to spread the Good News of Christ's life, death and resurrection; which now, through our baptism, where we receive the Holy Spirit and through the grace of God, we are able us to carry on their work in our generation.

Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would not have been possible. There can be no life in Christ, no understanding of the gospels without the Holy Spirit.

As a body without breath is dead so the church without the Holy Spirit is dead.

Now we come to verses 5 to 13, where we are told that there were devout Jews of every nation living in Jerusalem, in fact the whole city would be bulging at the seams with Jewish people from all over the Middle East.

Pentecost, the Greek name given to the feast of weeks which fell 50 days after the Passover, was a time to celebrate the first fruits of the harvest.

In hot countries they are able to have two harvests because things grow so much quicker there.

So to celebrate the first harvest Jews would come for miles to Jerusalem to celebrate, it was a time of joy and thanksgiving.

Now that is again a sign of God's sheer inspiration to choose that day to launch his church, when anybody who was anybody was there when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit onto his disciples.

God couldn't have chosen a better time when everybody was there to witness it.

And to make doubly sure that they did witness it and were able to understand it, he gave the disciples the ability to speak in the tongues of the people who were foreigners in the city.

Our God is a good manager and organiser. Which reminds me what Roger Packer, one our previous rectors used to say, 'That good management never hurt anyone only bad management hurts people'. I may not have quoted him word for word but that's the essence of what he said.

Our God is indeed a good manager who cares for us and loves us and who would never hurt anyone.

Now from verse 14 we have another miracle, Peter, who nearly 50 days ago was cowering in an upper room with the doors bolted and locked against his fellow countrymen, was now standing up with the other disciples in front of the crowd.

Not only that he now raised his voice, probably to a shout, so that the mass of people who were now crowding around them could hear, and he explained what was spoken through the prophet Joel.

And we then heard that lovely prophesy from Joel which you can read from Joel chapter 2 which starts, “On the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh”. And at Pentecost his prophesy came true.

And the final verse of Joel's prophesy reads, “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”.

You've also now got it from the prophet Joel that it isn't being able to decipher scripture that will save us, although understanding scripture may give us more confidence in the Lord.

It's not even being good people that will save us, although in some cases that might help.

No, it is not those things that will save us; it is faith in the risen Christ alone that will save us.

As we sit let us pray.

Lord Jesus we thank you for pouring out your Holy Spirit on us and blessing us with so many gifts. Please be with us and help us to use these gifts daily in our lives to your praise and glory; we ask this in your name Lord.

Amen.