

## SERMON – PENTECOST 2020

'Dead lions' is my favourite children's party game because of the brief respite it gives to those in charge of organising large parties for excited children. For the uninitiated everyone lies flat on the floor pretending to be dead. Meanwhile the child who is 'it' tries to spot any movement, laughter or wriggling. And for most children it seems, it's almost impossible to lie dead still. Suddenly they become aware that even their breathing, usually unnoticed, makes it actually quite difficult to win at this game. But breathing is like that isn't it? We forget about it most of the time, but at every key moment of life, and especially in this pandemic, we become really anxious about it. At birth we dare not relax until the first breath is drawn; and then as we watch life slip away, we wait for the final breath.

What is true of breath is also true of wind. Mostly it's hardly noticeable. It's only when we feel its strength in a storm or its discomfort from draughts that we appreciate its power. On days when it feels as if there's no movement of air we long for a breeze; in a gale we long for it to be over and for no damage to be done. The wind is something we never see yet it's as crucial to the life of the world as is breath to the life of a body.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, and nearly 2,000 years after that event it's surprising how much the imagery used by the Biblical writers to describe the coming of the Holy Spirit remains dynamic and awe-inspiring. Indeed wind, fire, and water all still have immense power over human life and we do well to remember it. So often though at Pentecost our attention is directed to the effect that the coming of the Holy Spirit had on the lives of the disciples; instead today let's focus upon the **cost** of his coming. For if we realise what the cost of the gift was and is to our Lord, we might better understand what it might cost **us** to make that gift our own and to let it take hold in our lives. This cost is spelled out in St John's Gospel, from which our Gospel reading comes today.

Perhaps first though we should think about why we seem to have two different accounts of the gift of the Holy Spirit in today's readings. Did the Holy Spirit come on Easter Day, as in St John's account which focuses upon the commissioning of the disciples; or is the account in Acts some fifty days later more factually accurate? This is a huge question which has exercised Biblical scholars from the earliest times but for me the following is the best solution to be offered. John has seen fit to focus his book on the life of Jesus and does not include any information about the activity of the early church, including Pentecost. But without an account of the day of Pentecost the reader of John's Gospel could be left hanging because of the earlier promises made by Jesus about the Advocate or Holy Spirit. So John includes this account in such a way so as to leave no doubt in the mind of the reader who did not know about Pentecost that these promises had in fact been fulfilled.

Returning then to St John's Gospel- the gift of the Holy Spirit is in fulfilment of a prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.*  
(Jn14:16)

This prayer could only be fulfilled through Jesus' total offering of himself to the Father's will and glory. At the end of the Supper as we know, in the garden of Gethsemane, he struggled to accept what he knew had to happen *Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me* but in the end Jesus managed to let go of self and affirm *nevertheless, not what I will but what thou will be done*. So we can see that this surrender of self is at the heart of Jesus' prayer, and reaches its climax on Calvary, as Jesus moves right into the darkness of the world's tragedy. And it is from this sacrifice of self, from the spirit of losing life in order to find it, that there flows the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. That is the power like wind, fire and water.

When we pray then that we might know the power of the Spirit in our lives we would do well to remember what it cost our Lord and indeed might cost us to make such a prayer our own. Today in our church we are often bidden to pray for spiritual renewal and revival, but what I wonder is our vision for such a body? Well – try this for size - perhaps a church – a body of Christians renewed by the Holy Spirit, would be a body in which the sacrifice of the cross and the joy of Easter is apparent in the lives of all who claim to be a part of that body. It would be a company of Christians who care – care for God in putting Him first of all; care for one another in unselfish fellowship; and care for His world in the urgent service of those in need and who suffer. God so loved the world that He gave – gave Himself in Bethlehem, on Calvary, at Easter and Pentecost – gave Himself for us and to us so that through the power of his love which comes to us through the Holy Spirit, we too can give. It is thus that the power of Pentecost comes. Hence I hope that your visions and dreams are big today that Peter's words we heard this morning, quoting the prophet Joel, are shown to be coming true.

“In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

I pray that going forward you too are filled with power of the Holy Spirit and knowing the cost of this gift to our Lord, are ready to serve Him by serving others and putting self-interest into second place in your life.

I am reminded the in the months before he was assassinated in 1968 Bobby Kennedy went around the USA challenging his hearers to work for a better society and he always ended his speeches with these words

Some men see things as they are and say 'why?' I dream of things that never were and say, 'why not?'

Amen

