

This Sunday, the Church celebrates Pentecost and retelling the story of God sending the Holy Spirit on the disciples. It comes fifty days after Easter (hence Pentecost) and is sometimes described it as the birthday of the church.

This year has been like no other – we have spent this entire season physically distant and it has been hard to mark time – Holy Week with Good Friday, Easter, Ascension and now Pentecost.

Acts 2 (*The Message*)

2¹⁻⁴ When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

5-11 There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"

Many of us have a complex response to Pentecost, with its' emphasis on the person of the Holy Spirit. I acknowledge that some who read this have been victims of conversion therapy or will have had similarly negative experiences in 'Pentecostal' settings. However, the tragedy would be to let those experiences turn off growth, made possible in and by the Holy Spirit. I want to argue that our experience in the Christian life is impoverished because we have made the work and person of God too small.

Take for example, the two dominant symbols of the Holy Spirit – both derived from the scriptures. They are the dove, seen descending from the heavens at the Baptism of Christ, and flames of fire, seen here at Pentecost. Both bring a different emphasis - the first is one of peace and harmony, the second is more of a cleansing fire. From about the fourth century, the dove became the dominant image in the Roman church - was that because a dove with an emphasis gentleness felt far less threatening than uncontrollable fire? The traditional Celtic image for the Holy Spirit is the Wild Goose, which is loud, boisterous, and impossible to contain. Those of you familiar with the Iona Community in Scotland, will be aware they use this device today. God swoops in at times, pushing us beyond our complacency and familiarity challenging our desire to domesticate God to our terms and worldview.



It seems to me that this speaks to today when we consider recent events, most recently and graphically illustrated in the treatment of George Floyd in Minnesota which led to his death but also in the incident a few days later where a white woman in Central Park, who's dog was illegally off the leash, calls the police saying 'An African American is threatening me' when asked to put the dog on the leash.

The harsh truth is that this has been the received experience of visible minorities for generations – it just happens we have video and smartphones. We are rightly appalled but we only have to think of the treatment of indigenous peoples and other minority groups over the years here and the worrying spike in racist behaviour today to be reminded all is not as it should be.

Some say, give it time and these things will work themselves out, believing progress to be inevitable. Dr Martin Luther King Jr preached in Washington National Cathedral in 1968 addressed this:

There is an answer to that myth. It is that time is neutral. It can be used wither constructively or destructively. And I am sorry to say this morning that I am absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation, the extreme rightists of our nation—the people on the wrong side—have used time much more effectively than the forces of goodwill. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, "Wait on time."

Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.

Angus Ritchie reminds us of the origins of Pentecostalism in the Azusa Street Revival of 1906: "The Holy Spirit's action converted individuals, formed a church whose common life ran counter to the racial and social segregation of the day, and challenged structural injustice in the wider society."¹ A timid, domesticated Holy Spirit did not do that and if God's kingdom is to come we need a fresh Pentecost, which transforms ourselves and our communities

¹ Church Times, May 21, 2020, citing Selina Stone and Shermara Fletcher

Reflection for Pentecost

This is echoed by our friend, Henri Nouwen, who said:

The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised to his followers, is the great gift of God. Without the Spirit of Jesus we can do nothing, but in and through his Spirit we can live free, joyful, and courageous lives. We cannot pray, but the Spirit of Christ can pray in us. We cannot create peace and joy, but the Spirit of Christ can fill us with a peace and joy that is not of this world. We cannot break through the many barriers that divide races, sexes, and nations, but the Spirit of Christ unites all people in the all-embracing love of God. The Spirit of Christ burns away our many fears and anxieties and sets us free to move wherever we are sent. That is the great liberation of Pentecost.

Also, Romans 5:5b:

“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

If we are to live more fully into the life God has for us, if we are to truly see God’s Kingdom come here on earth so that stories of racism, sexism and other forms of injustice become less common then we need a more expansive vision of God, living in the life of the Holy Spirit.

Will you join with me in saying this short prayer together every day?

**Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful;
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen!**