

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Pentecost is one of those Christian Festivals that, in retrospect, we talk about as if it were normal but it is, very strange! The same might be said for most Christian Festivals, actually: a child born to a virgin at Christmas, a man come back from the dead at Easter, ascending to heaven in a cloud; and so, the list goes on...But Pentecost ranks up there with them all, as a most bizarre story.

And I should imagine that the first disciples were just as perplexed as we are when we think deeply about the event. I wonder how the disciples were feeling that first Pentecost morning? They were all gathered together in one place. What a few weeks they had experienced! Entering Jerusalem with Jesus to a hero's welcome, turning the tables over in the temple, seeing Jesus arrested and falsely tried, the people of Jerusalem turning against him, wanting him dead, Jesus tortured and crucified, dying an agonising death, running away, only to hear about the resurrection - then coming face to face with Jesus in the flesh again. Then spending another month with him doing what? No-one really knows. Then the Ascension into heaven. The disciples must have been so confused, so emotionally exhausted, not knowing what on earth was coming next.

So here we find them, gathered together; and it is Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish festival: a major festival first recorded in Deuteronomy 16, a celebration of the harvest. And the disciples were back together again to celebrate Pentecost, perhaps looking forward to the stability of a religious festival that they all knew so well; ready to meet with God as they always had done.

But things are different now - and God uses this moment to fulfil his promise and send the Holy Spirit upon them. The disciples were together, probably praying, and a wind like a tornado fills the house, tongues of fire rest on each believer, and they begin speaking uncontrollably in tongues. The scene was so bizarre that there could only be one, rational conclusion: the crowds of people around them thought that they were drunk.

But no...Peter assures them all that what they are experiencing is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: the gift of God to the early church – and to us, of course.

Now, I'm sure we have all received some strange, and not very useful, gifts in our time - but here was one gift from God that no-one knew what to do with. What on earth was the Holy Spirit given to them for? And, importantly, why does God give us the Holy Spirit in our church community here in St Marys?

Well, let's think through the options that some people give us.

### **The gift of excitement**

Some people would believe that God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to energise the church and make it more exciting. Let's be honest: church is not the most exciting activity in the world, is it? If we are looking for excitement, there are better places to go and better hobbies to do.

And yet it seems to me that some Christians and Churches treat the Holy Spirit as if this is the gift to make the church an exciting, energised place to be.

Of course, there is some truth in this: it is indeed the Holy Spirit who energises us, it is indeed the Holy Spirit who inspires us and stirs us up for mission. But the Spirit is not a gift from God to make church a place of excitement in the sense that we should come here for entertainment. Instead, the energy and excitement that the Holy Spirit brings is for a different purpose altogether.

It seems that the gift of the Holy Spirit to energise and excite is directly related to how we organise church and how we organise our structures and corporate life together. There is nothing boring about the institution of the church - but there is something intensely boring and lifeless about institutionalism in the church. What does this mean?

When the Holy Spirit of God is energising and exciting the institution of the church, it is, by definition, a lively place to be. But when the Holy Spirit of God is excluded and people just cling on to structures for the sake of structures, then the institution is dead because of institutionalism which, by definition, is lifeless and bland. So we must always be mindful of allowing the Holy Spirit to breathe through the institution and structures of our church. When we do that, our structuring will be energised, our worship will be lively, our mission activity will be meaningful and will transform our community.

The Holy Spirit excites and energises not so that we can be entertained, but so that we can be a mission-oriented church both structurally and in terms of the activities we undertake.

### **The gift of power**

For some, the Holy Spirit is a gift of power. Jesus had promised that: we read his words in the Gospels: “When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall receive power.” But there is appropriate and inappropriate power with regard to the church.

There was a time when the Church was one of the most powerful institutions in society: the Church lay behind political decisions, economic policy and the legal system, and the Church determined community values. But the Church does not hold that same sort of influence today, and some people may lament the passing of those times. More realistically, it seems inappropriate for the Church to have – or demand – power just because it is the Church and it has money and influence.

Christ did promise that the Holy Spirit would confer power on the church: but not that sort of power. The power the church has, is power that is born out of brokenness, not strength. The power that the church has is a prophetic influence, not a dictatorial role. The power that the church has is worked out through counter-cultural behaviour, not dictating the mainstream of society.

And so, it is appropriate, in the Holy Spirit, for us to seek power: not the power of domination or overt influence but the power of prophetic weakness. The type of power that shows the way of the cross as the way to life.

So, the Holy Spirit is the gift of energy and excitement. The Holy Spirit is the gift of power. But crucially, and I think this is the most important of all...

### **The gift of the word**

The Holy Spirit is the gift of the message to proclaim. One of the central images of the Pentecost event, as we have heard from our reading, is the fact that the silence was broken and the believers began speaking in different languages. Those who were there heard the Gospel message being proclaimed in their own tongue. It was the Holy Spirit who gave the Church something to say.

As Peter explained the Pentecost phenomenon to people, he drew their attention to the prophecy of Joel in the Old Testament: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy...”

The church has a message. That is the command to go and tell others the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is not something that we do in our own strength but in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the words to say.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is ultimately a gift, not to the Church, but to the whole world. Yes, we are energised and excited: not so we can be entertained, but so we can fruitfully engage in mission. Yes, we are empowered: not so that we can rule over society, but so we can draw people, by our example, to the cross. And, ultimately through the Holy Spirit, we are given a voice and a message to proclaim so that the whole world will hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ.

We want to be a ‘Pentecost Church’: a church that is empowered and structured for mission, a church that is broken for mission, a church that has a prophetic word to bring to the world. That is the Spirit of Pentecost we celebrate today - and that is the Spirit we are called to embrace in all our activities: the Spirit of energy, the Spirit of power, the Spirit of prophecy. The Holy Spirit of God.

We want to be a Pentecost Church. We want to know the power of the Holy Spirit among us and so we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and we ask him to bless us all here so that we can be a blessing to the whole community and beyond.

*Credit – St Andrew’s Enfield 2025 (parts)*