

Reflection for Pentecost Sunday 2023

Every so often in the media we are informed of some “new and important breakthroughs” - breakthroughs that we are told will change a particular situation or issue forever. It could be a new drug that will combat some killer disease or an advance in genetics that may open up a whole host of new possibilities. In the world of politics and diplomacy, it could be that a way has been found to bring together groups that are normally diametrically opposed to each other, and with that coming together, there are new economic possibilities or hopes for peace.

But for all the fanfares that herald such moments there is also a warning; a breakthrough, however important, is not in itself the end of the story rather just the beginning of a new chapter.

On a domestic level, take a young child - my 10 month old granddaughter is an example! They reach that point where they can pull themselves up and before long make that first faltering step – an important moment, a breakthrough; but one which has to be built on if the child is to become fully stable and able to run around at will. A breakthrough, too, that gives the parents a whole host of new challenges: so many more things are now accessible!

Today we celebrate Pentecost and, in many ways, Pentecost was a breakthrough moment. With a strong wind and in what looked like tongues of fire the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. Things changed forever, ushering in the birth of the church. Yet, like so many other breakthrough events, as important as it was, it was not the end, rather it was an opening of a new chapter: a chapter of struggle, a chapter that has stretched out down through the centuries as the disciples pick up the baton left to them by Christ and take the message of the gospel, of God’s love to every corner of the globe.

For Luke the events of Pentecost are a pivot, marking the beginning of the story he records in his second volume, the book of Acts - one of those moments in history after which everything looks so very different, a day on which the page turns and a new chapter begins. A bit like the coronation many of us watched just a few weeks ago - the second Elizabethan era is over and reign of Charles III has begun.

Luke records this - *“When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

It is the power of the Holy Spirit that turns the disciples from a group of ordinary people into evangelists and missionaries who would take Jesus’ message across the Roman Empire and, in the space of just thirty years, transform an obscure Jewish sect into a world-wide religious movement, with the book of Acts ending in Rome - the centre of then known world.

As we remember the events of that Pentecost it would be all too easy for us to say *“that was then, but today it could never happen.”* To think that though would be to underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit, because that same spirit is still at work today. The Spirit is that which enables and empowers the church today. If the Spirit were to blow afresh in the same way, the world would be turned upside down.

It is worth highlighting three things about the events of Pentecost, as they help us to understand more clearly the way the spirit works.

Firstly, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is not given to one or two gathered there but to all the believers: *“all the believers were gathered together in one place.”* The story’s emphasis is on both the unity of the group and the way the spirit unites them in purpose. If you look at the Old Testament and you see examples of the spirit at work, it is given to individuals for specific tasks or

roles. Leaders like Moses, prophets such as Elijah and kings - David being the best examples. At Pentecost all that changes as God pours out the Spirit upon all people and, in doing, so gives then a new unity of purpose.

As the prophet Joel puts it

Afterwards I will pour out my Spirit on everyone: your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your old people will have dreams, and your young people will see visions. At that time I will pour out my Spirit even on servants, both men and women.

The Holy Spirit has not changed from that outpouring in Jerusalem. It is God's gift and God's helper offered to each one of us - the one who unites, or should unite us in purpose.

Secondly, the Spirit is not some private gift purely for the benefit of the individuals present, something to be kept secret, rather it spreads like a fire touching all around, challenging many in Jerusalem. Look at the list of those present in Jerusalem: those from Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia Pamphylia, Egypt, the regions of Libya near Cyrene and Rome: almost a complete list of the Rome Empire, each hearing the message in their own language. Right from the moment that the Spirit is out poured the intention, or the direction of the story of Acts is clear. The Spirit will make the message of God, his love and saving work known to the whole world. Jesus' disciples being mere tools in that process.

One of the challenges of Pentecost; are we willing like those disciples to allow ourselves to be used by the Spirit as tools through which God's love can be shared?

Thirdly, look at Peter's sermon. It is not carefully crafted and written, it is not even part of some preconceived mission strategy, rather it is preached as a direct response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

I would not say that is always the best plan or strategy, but what it does show is that we need to be willing to respond to what God is doing through his spirit. Look at Acts as whole and what you see fairly regularly are the apostles almost running to catch up with the work of the Holy Spirit.

There have been times in my journey of faith, where I had things ordered and planned out only for something to flash into my head, maybe a person's name or a situation. The question is do I carry on with my plan or do I respond to that prompting? What I have found almost in an uncanny sort of way is that when I have responded to that prompting, it has been the most important thing I did that day.

Are we willing to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit? As much as we may think we are in control, the work of the church is in fact God's work not ours; we are simply his tools guided by his spirit.

Pentecost then remind us of the working of God's Spirit

The Spirit, unites the church.

The Spirit is the one who makes Christ known in all the world.

The Spirit is the one we should be open too, as we seek to serve God in our daily lives.

Let us pray that the Spirit of God will dwell within each one of us afresh and as the Spirit does so, the Kingdom of God will grow.