

Acts 2: 1-21
Pymble 20.5.18
Mission Aflame

What an evocative description this Pentecost story is!
There's rushing of violent wind;
flames of fire filling the room and resting on each person;
and the miraculous ability to speak in unlearned languages!
Perhaps we should expect nothing less since
this is the story of the very presence of God
coming to be with God's people in a powerful new way,
just as Jesus had said.
Now it may be evocative and intriguing
but it can also seem a long way from our thoughtful
and somewhat restrained worship and communal life in the Church today.
But if nothing else this morning, I hope you will hear this one truth:
this Pentecost story is your story; it is our story!

And I thought I'd identify at 3 aspects of the Spirit's role.
Firstly, the Spirit came among all of them *and* upon each of them.
Luke, the author, tells this story carefully to convey both
the communal and the individual experience of the Spirit
coming upon the gathered community.
Wind and fire were familiar images of God's presence
from the Hebrew scriptures.
And so we hear, wind filled the entire house,
and tongues of fire appear among them *and upon each* of them.
We needn't worry that a modern-day repeat of this experience
would set off the smoke alarms – this is no literal description –
but a faith-filled narrative to convey
the truth of the Spirit's presence in the church.
The Spirit's coming was something that the followers experienced
as a gathered community
and it was something they experienced individually.

So of course we can and ought to experience
God's Spirit when we are alone –
and perhaps in our highly individualised culture
we feel most comfortable experiencing God that way.
I'm happy to say I enjoyed a heightened sense of God's Spirit
while alone on the Larapinta Trail, for example.
But we also ought to be alert for God's Spirit
when we gather as a community to pray, to worship,
to open the Scriptures and break bread together.
It is here that the Spirit seeks us out and becomes active among us;
enlivening rituals, bringing ancient words to new life,

binding us together in love and peace,
inspiring us with fresh hope
and sending us out as people with a purpose.

The community also brings some discipline; exercising discernment for the more extreme individual imaginings of the Spirit. Sometimes we can get carried away by ourselves and imagine that God is saying all sorts of things to us when we are on our own, but submitting these thoughts to the community often helps us filter and discern what God is really saying to us.

I trust this is how God's Spirit will work with us as we discern our future path as a congregation. I don't imagine it will be one individual having a complete vision of how it will look, but rather as we talk and work together gradually the Spirit will help us discern a common path. God may well work through individuals but it will be together that we sense our calling as a Church.

So this text celebrates that as Christ's people we *already* have the Spirit in us and among us, *and* it encourages us to be continually open to more of God's Spirit in and among us. Perhaps it is no accident that one of the words for the Spirit is *breath*. Like our breath, we can take God's Spirit for granted and at times have to be awakened once more to its powerful and life-giving work within us. This is the early church's experience throughout the Book of Acts – many times the community is filled with God's Spirit: to encourage them at difficult moments, to fill them with boldness, to welcome and incorporate the Gentiles, and more. This is the activity of the Spirit – filling us, resting upon us, nudging us, however we like to talk of it – but always with the result of **effecting transformation** in us, particularly in the area of sharing the good news of Jesus.

This is my second point;
the unmistakable function of the Spirit for the Church is to drive the Church into mission.

The Spirit comes to get the Church moving; to empower its witness to Christ. God's Spirit is spoken of in many ways in the New Testament, but nowhere is the Spirit's role described as simply making Christians feel better about themselves

or providing a warm inner glow.
And here in Acts the first thing the Spirit does
is to help the group communicate the good news about Jesus
to diaspora Jews, that is, Jews spread all around the Roman world
in different language groups
but gathered in Jerusalem for the important Pentecost festival.
It is these people who come running at the sound of the violent wind
and who then hear the believers speaking in their own tongues.

*“Amazed and astonished they asked, ‘Are not all these speaking Galileans?
And how is it that we each hear, each of us, in our own native language?
...in our own language we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ “*

God’s Spirit is helping the believers communicate with those
who are largely strangers.
They have some religious or cultural connection being Jews,
but they don’t speak the language until God does something within them.
Surely this is the modern Church’s greatest need:
to speak the language of those around us.
We have some historic cultural connection
with our neighbours and friends
but as the Church we have lost the ability to speak about God
in a way that makes sense to them.
Let us ask God’s Spirit for this most necessary gift.

Thirdly, we note the forward-looking, imaginative role of the Spirit
with the mention of **dreams and visions**.

Peter responds to the crowd’s questions about what is going on
by naming it as a sign of God doing the new thing
he said he would do back in the book of Joel.

We hear about the Spirit democratically enabling
dreams and visions by men and women, sons and daughters,
old and young, and even slaves.

Part of the role of the Spirit is to help us imagine and re-imagine
what the future can be.

So often we get locked into the belief that what is, must continue;
that we can’t break out and do a new thing, that we can’t change,
even when we want to.

But all new things begin with a vision, a dream,
and in the economy of God
those dreamy insights come from the Spirit working within.

Part of what is motivating us as a Village at the moment
is a slow-burning dream that the church can offer something new

to the people of our area.

As congregations we have been active and faithful in the past and yet we realise that the wider community has shifted in many ways and we are playing catch-up as Church.

But we dream a community of all ages and stages of life; we envision a place where people interested in spiritual matters can explore with us what Christian faith can mean for them; we imagine an inclusive community where the gospel comes alive in new ways, perhaps without some of the baggage of traditional church.

The details of the dream are still quite blurry but the values and principles are coming into focus.

And I believe this is the Spirit's work within us re-imagining the future for our congregations.

At the Presbytery meeting last Wednesday, it was very encouraging to hear another part of a dream coming to fruition.

Last year the Presbytery committed to the *Presbytery Young People Project* or PYPP.

We felt strongly that we needed to encourage and resource our young people to grow in faith and to ensure good leadership and so we made a commitment to some funds and a fledgling idea.

On Wednesday we heard from 4 young people – and I mean quite young; from about 10 to 18 years – who were a handful of the 17 from our area who attended a *Soul Survivor* conference in Coffs Harbour recently.

These kids came back full of faith and enthusiasm for their role with their churches.

Two of the very young ones lead the singing as part of our worship; one boy of perhaps 12 spoke of his first real sense of God for himself apart from his family;

and the conference was arranged in such a way that there were worship and teaching sessions but also service sessions in the afternoon where small groups went and painted an op shop, for example, or weeded the garden of a community group.

And they spoke of how this helped them see the integration between learning, worship and service.

It was just so encouraging hearing these kids speak of their experience, but it was especially encouraging because it was a little part of the Presbytery dream coming to fruition to resource and support young people in the faith.

But you have to have the dream and vision in order to set out on a particular course.

So as we read again this familiar passage from the Book of Acts,
let us not view this high-powered and deeply symbolic text
as judging us, or tormenting us;
let us not say that our task is to “get back”
to the way the early church was,
for so much about our context is different
and I don’t think we are meant to recreate it just as it was.
Instead, let us simply see that this is the Church’s story;
and as such that this is *our story*
because we too are part of the people of Christ.
The Spirit has come upon us.
We are the creation of the Spirit of God
and so we are dependent upon the Spirit
for our life, our mission, and our future.
And that is why the Church’s petition is always, *Come Holy Spirit,*
or as we will now sing,
O breath of life, come sweeping through us!
Amen