

Pentecost 2021. St George's.

The apostles **were constantly devoting themselves to prayer**. These are words from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles describing how the apostles occupied themselves in the period after Jesus's ascension and before the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. They **were constantly devoting themselves to prayer**. I shall return to those words a little later.

Today is the first Sunday for a long time that this Chapel has been fully open to people who wish to worship within its walls. Those of us who see ourselves as members of the regular congregation of St George's have missed each other, and have felt deprived of the support and encouragement derived from our corporate offering of prayer and praise, and from our simply 'being together'. We have also regretted our not having the opportunity to welcome visitors; visitors who remind us that we are part of the wider Church, and of a wider world. Here today therefore, there is a sense of the possibility of a new beginning.

If there is a sense of the possibility of a 'new beginning', it seems entirely fitting that it should be on the Feast of Pentecost that we start again. It is on the Feast of Pentecost that we remember that, as those first disciples were together in one place, no doubt (as St Luke tells us of their practice) **constantly devoting themselves to prayer**, they were seized by, inspired by, brought to life by the Holy Spirit. In some strange way, God was present within them and among them, just as it had seemed to be the case with Jesus. From now on perhaps, they were to be his Body in the world. No wonder some have called the Feast of Pentecost the 'Birthday of the Church'. There was certainly a new beginning to the lives of the followers of Jesus; a new surge of confidence, and a deeper understanding of their vocation.

St Luke, the author of The Acts of the Apostles, in which we read the story of the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, is unlikely to have been present in Jerusalem at the time. His account is, as with so much in the Gospels and the Acts, second hand. He has heard it from others. There is no need however to doubt his fidelity to what he understood to be the 'truth'.

At the same time, it has always been clear to Christians that his description of events needs some interpretation. What does the "sound like the rush of a violent wind" mean beyond its being a literal description? What are we to make of those "Divided tongues, as of fire" that "rested on each of them"? What is the meaning of their speaking "in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability"?

Luke's account of the Day of Pentecost is extraordinarily rich. This morning, I want to illustrate its richness by selecting just one detail from the story. Luke writes: "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them."

In the hymnbook that we use (The New English Hymnal) the first hymn in the section for Pentecost is a translation of a 4th century Latin hymn. Its third verse provides a description and interpretation of the ‘tongues of fire’ detail. It goes as follows:

Like quivering tongues of light and flame,
Upon each one the Spirit came:
Tongues, that the earth might hear their call,
And fire, that love might burn in all.

Whoever wrote the original lines had certainly reflected long and hard on the ‘detail’ of the tongues. He had noticed that St Luke, in writing of the ‘tongues’ of fire, had used the same Greek word that he was to use when he wrote of the Apostles beginning to “speak in other languages” or, to be more accurate perhaps, in other ‘tongues’.

So what of the ‘fire’? Christians have understood, down through the ages, that ‘fire’ denotes the Divine Presence, the holiness of God, and the purifying love of God.

Our 4th century writer interpreted the descent of the flames of fire upon each of the Apostles as being their God-given commission to ‘speak’ the word of God’s ‘love’ to the world around.

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And fire, that love might burn in all.

Well, I am not certain that St Luke would have had that in mind ‘exactly’ when he composed the Acts of the Apostles. I am sure, however, that such an interpretation is consistent with Luke’s understanding of God’s commission to the newly born Church. Speak the word of God’s passionate and purifying love to the world around.

We read the account of the Day of Pentecost, and we hear the words of our 4th century author, as we, like those early disciples, find ourselves “all together in one place”. For us too, our gathering has the potential to be a new beginning. Perhaps, in light of what we have heard and learnt, we long to have a greater sense of God’s commission, to be more inspired and reassured in our witness, and to be more fluent channels of God’s love. We wait for the inspiration and the guidance of the Spirit.

In those words lies something of great importance. “We (must) wait (and surely wait time and time again) for the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit.” The gift of the Holy Spirit is not something we can generate through our own efforts, though there are many who attempt to do so. It is a gift for which we can only pray. St Luke tells

us that, before the Day of Pentecost, the apostles **were constantly devoting themselves to prayer**. For all the activity and adventure of the Christian story, not least as told in the Acts of the Apostles, there is a profound but positive ‘passivity’ at the heart of the Christian life. There is a ‘waiting’ and a ‘praying’. But time and opportunity do seem to come for most of us, if often by surprise. At least from time to time, we share the experience of the earliest followers of Jesus.

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