



# *Pentecost Sunday*

## *Sermon by Revd Sharmain James*



Sunday 28 May 2023

### READINGS

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:26-36; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

## *The coming of the Holy Spirit*

It's Pentecost Sunday. The day when the church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit in power upon the apostles in Jerusalem fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the day we hear from the Acts of the Apostles about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We told of a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where the disciples were sitting. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. I don't know about you, but the combination of violent winds blowing, and fire dancing overhead sounds a bit terrifying to me. But these chaotic images are put before us so that we might appreciate the magnitude of the moment. We see Peter interpreting the event for those present, linking the descent of the Spirit with ancient prophecies from the book of Joel and with the promise of Jesus himself. We see the Spirit giving birth to the church. It's a powerful text with powerful imagery.

Even though Acts 2:1-21 is likely the preferred reading on Pentecost Sunday, our Lectionary also offers the option of considering John 20:19-23. Unlike the reading from Acts - John gives us a quieter version of Pentecost. It is not fifty days after the Resurrection; but we rewind a few weeks from the scene in Acts 2 to the day after Jesus' resurrection. It is the evening of that first day of the week. The disciples are gathered behind locked doors for fear of some of the Jews. They are still absorbing Jesus's painful death, their own actions and inaction around that, and now there are some stories of his resurrection.

Whatever else they may be feeling or thinking, - they are confused and hurting. And then suddenly, they recognize a new presence in their midst. Jesus quietly appears and simply says to his beloved friends and disciples: "Peace be with you." When they see the nail marks in his hands and in his side, they know it is Jesus who says to them again, Peace be with you. The greeting is an invitation to stop being afraid.

There are many things in our contexts and in the broader world that incite fear within us – fear that is frequently stoked by television news or social media. We fear the unknown in times of upheaval and transition. We fear for our economic security and that of our children. We even fear for our physical security in places we formerly thought we were safe – like schools, churches, hospitals. In the wake of armed robberies that have taken place at churches – many places of worship have re-evaluated their security plans.

But we must balance this with our belief in the risen Christ – who enters in spite of our locked doors and greets us with his peace. Jesus gave to those fearful, stressed out disciples his peace. He calmed them, he comforted them and he strengthened them by giving to them his peace. This peace that passes understanding. And then when he had helped them in this way with their personal struggles he reminded them, “as the Father has sent me, so I sent you.” And to help them with this - he breathed on them and said, “receive the Holy Spirit.”

In that locked room, the Holy Spirit comes upon those gathered, not with great dramatic flair but quietly, intimately. That’s how it happened, according to John in an intimate gathering and with a gentle breath. The word “breathed” is unique in the New Testament and is found elsewhere in Scripture to describe God creating. In Genesis we read that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” and in doing this created Adam from the Earth. The Book of Wisdom speaks of God “who breathed a living spirit into them” (15:11). In John, too, Jesus’s breathing is connected with God’s creating.

The Spirit gives the disciples new purpose and meaning. The Holy spirit transforms and empowers them. As we heard from the reading from Acts. These once terrified people were filled with the dynamic power of God, the power that refreshes and re-creates, the power that comforts, strengthens and heals. The power from God burned within these people and they went forth and proclaimed the message of God’s love that was perfectly shown in the resurrection of Jesus.

They went out to proclaim God’s forgiveness. Forgiveness is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when we think about Pentecost. One of the most difficult things we ever do is forgive another. We know we should forgive. It is the right thing to do. It is the Christian thing to do. It’s what Jesus would do. Even more difficult than forgiving another is to forgive ourselves, to set our self-free.

Jesus says: If you forgive as I have forgiven you, those you encounter will experience the healing and liberating power of God’s forgiveness. If you don’t, sadly, they won’t. You will have allowed an opportunity to bear witness to God’s forgiveness to pass you by. To forgive is a way of bearing witness to Christ and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and among us.

So, two stories, two giving’s of the Spirit. One characterized by fire and wind and public spectacle. One a private affair behind closed and fearful doors. One to launch a church in power and to give the courage to speak boldly about the good news of the risen Christ. One to speak peace, to encourage, and to embolden the church to be the forgiveness of Jesus in the world.

The same Spirit is active and at work in both stories. God is no less present in everyday acts of love and forgiveness than he is the spectacular. May the Spirit of the risen Christ breathe into us his life and enable us to enact his forgiveness in the world. May the Spirit of the risen Christ fan the flames of our devotion to proclaim this good news.

Amen