



# *Pentecost Sunday*

## *Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe*



Sunday 5 June 2022

### READINGS

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-36; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17

## *The Life of the Spirit in Us*

The author and spiritual teacher Danielle Shroyer wrote, “Without Pentecost, we’d just be people who tell Jesus’ story. With Pentecost, we’re people who live into Jesus’ story.”

When we celebrate the feast of Pentecost each year in church, we surround ourselves with symbols that remind us of the day when the gift of God’s Spirit was poured out on the believers, as described in the book of Acts chapter 2.

For the past three years, St Michael’s online services have included the Acts reading in different languages. In some churches where I’ve worshipped, we’ve stood up in the pews around the church and read it during the service in all our languages, all at the same time. In this way we recreate the experience of what it could have been like for the people from all the nations present on that day, hearing the apostles declaring the wonders of God in their own tongues.

Of course, to dramatise the event is not to diminish it, but to help convey some of the sense of surprise and excitement for those present. But more so, it is to acknowledge the message of the day and its significance for us. We might be more than a bit uncomfortable with a REAL Pentecost experience, because that day didn’t follow a script or go according to plan. In the same way, the work of God’s Spirit in our lives, the life of the church and in the world is unscripted. The movement of God’s Spirit is not limited by human ability or dictated to by our human agenda. The Spirit is limitless, so to try and convey all that there is to convey about the work of the Spirit and even the multiple meanings of Pentecost, often called “the birthday of the church”, is to attempt the impossible.

Today I simply want to highlight some ideas that we can carry forward in our own hearts as we look for signs of the Spirit at work within our own lives and in our community. These ideas are PURPOSE, POSSIBILITY and POWER.

We are reminded that the apostles were told to wait in Jerusalem until they received the gift that was promised to them. This is the gift which is recorded in the gospel of John when Jesus says to the disciples: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.”

I often wonder about why this Holy Spirit is a gift that they must wait for, as if the Spirit were not already at work and active in the world. My confirmation students ask me if they do not already have God's Spirit in them, guiding them and empowering them, if that is something that we pray for and anoint them for on their day of confirmation.

The answer for them and for us is not one or the other, but what we call "both /and". It is conveyed in the translation from John's gospel that says: "The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and WILL BE in you." Here the present and future tenses are mixed up and older translations have Jesus saying "He lives in you and is in you" rather than "will be in you".

We know from the scriptures that the Spirit is God, present throughout creation and in the lives of God's people. The Hebrew scripture tells of the breath of God, a mighty wind. We know the Spirit inspired the prophets, guiding them in speech and action. The tabernacle and the temple were both signs of the Spirit's presence among the people. Rather than referring to Pentecost as the time when the Spirit is given to the world, theologian John van de Laar gives us this explanation. He writes:

*Jesus gives us a clue ... when he says that "the world cannot receive him because it isn't looking for him..." Pentecost is ... a breakthrough in our human capacity to apprehend and experience God's activity...*

*At Pentecost we learn to look for God's Spirit – and the readings for today make it clear that God's Spirit can be seen and found anywhere and everywhere we look.*

I want to remind us of my three words for today: PURPOSE, POSSIBILITY and POWER.

Do we know the Spirit's purpose in our lives and the life of the church? Do we recognise the possibilities that stir within our own hearts? Possibilities for unity, for love, for transformation? And do we trust God's power at work in us and through us, or do we rather retreat from it because it makes us uncomfortable?

Are we open to living a life inspired and animated by the purposes, power and possibilities of God's creative and empowering Spirit?

John van de Laar's reflection and explanation continues like this:

*In receiving the new awareness of God's Spirit we find that we all speak a common Spirit-enabled language – the language of God-imagined, Spirit-filled, humanity.*

*Once our eyes are opened to see God's Spirit in all things (including those who are different from us, who are hostile toward us, and who are most repulsive to us), everything changes. We know ourselves ... as God's children and siblings of one another – and we willingly share Christ's suffering (as Paul says) to bring God's creation into awareness of this unity and community in God's Spirit.*

After reading the Gospel at the final service, we extinguish the Easter candle that had burned for the past six weeks of the Easter season. As a school chaplain, each year I ask my pupils, "Where did the flame go?" The answer is in the symbolic power of the flames of Pentecost burning above the apostles' heads, but it doesn't stop there.

The flame of the Easter candle no longer burns just here in our church, but rather within each one of us: the power, purpose and possibility of the resurrection life of Christ. My prayer this Pentecost is that each day we may better know and live out the power, purpose and possibilities in unity with God, alive and at work in us.