

Acts 2:1-21, 40-42

John 14:8-17

Introduction

This year we have some big birthdays in my family. My eldest niece is forty in two weeks' time and one of my other nieces has just turned thirty. This has been a big shock for me because I don't think of myself as being much over 40 anyway!

Birthdays are really important events, not just because they mark the fact that another year has passed and someone has lived more of life but because they celebrate that at someone's birth a completely unique and important life has begun. There will never be anyone else the same as each of us, every life is unique and every life must be celebrated.

Thinking back to my own training as a midwife I think of that moment of birth as being one of wonder and of terror. Wonder, because a new being has come amongst us. A person who we couldn't see before is now in our midst, a creation made by God and their parents. And terror because of that pause between the child arriving from the womb and them taking their first breath. Sometimes it is a negligible pause; sometimes it can seem very long indeed. It is the most important breath anyone will ever take because it separates life from death.

Today, at Pentecost, we are celebrating the birthday of the church. At the feast of Pentecost the Christian Church was born. It was born of the Holy Spirit as he breathed his life into a group of frightened, uncertain, anxious and ill-equipped ordinary people. The life came through wind and flame; through the life-giving breath of God, and the flame that showed each individual being transformed, cleansed and purified for God's service.

Before he ascended into heaven Jesus had told his followers to remain in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from on high. They probably had no idea what that actually meant but they obediently returned to the city and spent their time together. We are told, "*When the day of Pentecost arrived they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the*

Acts 2:1-21, 40-42

John 14:8-17

blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them."

So how do we know that this was the birth of something new, a new creation?

After Jesus' death the disciples had been bewildered, confused, terrified, anxious and guilty. The appearance of their master after he had risen from the dead dealt with the confusion and guilt. They now knew what had happened at Jesus' death and why it had to happen. They were certain he had risen from the dead and he had offered them forgiveness and healing.

But although they were still committed followers of Jesus and now understood more of his mission they were still essentially the same diverse, incohesive, unprepared group of people.

What happened on the day of Pentecost created something completely new and transformed their character, their behavior and their gifts for ever; their old uncertain, weak and fallible natures were transformed and they became different – both in themselves and as a group.

So what were the effects of this new birth?

They received:

- The overwhelming joy and commitment to worship that comes from God's presence in our hearts – part of the fruit of God's spirit at work in our lives.
- Gifts from the spirit – shown initially by the gift of tongues, but soon in the power to preach, to teach, to heal, to bring others to faith.
- Courage and ability to speak the word of God so powerfully that it transformed lives and brought people to faith in Jesus

Acts 2:1-21, 40-42

John 14:8-17

- A change in their focus. They were now committed to prayer, worship and learning the Good News.

The disciples were now Pentecost people, filled with God's presence seeing the benefits of his presence in changing their whole characters and in transforming the lives of others.

Consider the sermon Peter preached.

Peter had wanted to follow Jesus to his death. He told him he would. He even followed him to the High Priest's house but when it came to the point his courage completely deserted him. He was unable to even admit to knowing Jesus, let alone to being one of his followers. Words failed him and he ran away.

Yet now, less than two months later, having been transformed by power from on high; he stood up and addressed the crowd, which is not an easy thing to do. This was not simply a crowd of his fellow countrymen. He wasn't speaking to people of the same language, understanding and background. He was speaking to a vast crowd of foreigners. Yet each one understood him because the Holy Spirit had given him the gift of tongues.

He was now unafraid to admit to knowing Jesus and following him, more than that he stood his ground and gave an account of his faith in Jesus. He opened scripture to his audience. They were from many places but all of the Jewish faith so the prophecy of Joel would have been familiar to them. He explained that this manifestation of power was what God had promised to his people and he then went on to preach about Jesus. How he had come from God, been handed over to death on the cross, had risen from the dead.

Peter's sermon was remarkable for its grasp of scripture, its understanding of what God had done and its power and clarity. This was not the rough fisherman Simon speaking, this was God's new creation: Peter. And as a result of his words, we are told, "*Those who accepted his message were baptized, and*

Acts 2:1-21, 40-42

John 14:8-17

about three thousand people were added to their number that day."

The church was born. Hallelujah! And we too are products of that new birth. Do we know the power of the Spirit in our lives, making us holy, giving us power to serve, transforming our weak imperfect natures and making us ambassadors for Christ?

When I went up to London to train as a nurse I worshipped at a fairly conservative Evangelical church. I had the privilege of hearing some wonderful preaching and learning from very gifted preachers. But one of the things I was taught was that the miraculous signs and wonders performed by the Holy Spirit through the apostles were only given for that time and place as the early church was established and we couldn't expect them to happen today.

So I stopped expecting God to work through me and, although in my early years as a Christian I had often heard God speaking to me and giving me his gifts I stopped expecting him to work in me and through me and gradually the joy and power went out of my life.

Then after a few years I found myself wondering about the difference in the way that God worked in my life and had worked through the disciples and wondered if he would again work through me. So I asked him to speak to me and enable me to hear him. I asked him to fill me again with his spirit and work through me. I noticed an enormous change and God began again to speak to me and work in me. So in fact if we want to see God's power working in our lives we simply need to ask God to speak to us, to expect him to speak and to learn to listen to what he says and act on it. It transforms our lives when we do.

So are we Pentecost people?

Do we:

Acts 2:1-21, 40-42

John 14:8-17

Know the overwhelming joy and commitment to worship that comes from God's presence in our hearts – part of the fruit of God's spirit at work in our lives. Does knowing Jesus fill us with joy that bubbles up into praise and gives us delight in worshipping him? Or is our faith a matter of duty, of coming to church because that is what we do? Is it a struggle following Jesus and do we find that other things push Jesus out of the way and make our joy grow dim?

Do we experience the gifts from the spirit – not necessarily the gift of tongues, but have we asked God to give us the gifting we need in order to serve him and produce fruit in our lives? In our churches are there members with the power to preach, to teach, to heal, to bring others to faith, to discern God at work and to speak his message into our situations? Are we longing to hear from God and to see him working in our lives?

Have we got the courage and ability to speak the word of God to others so that it is able to transform lives and bring people to faith in Jesus. Not like Peter by standing up and preaching to thousands but by humbly and simply being willing to give an account of our faith to those we live amongst?

What is the focus of our life together? Are we committed to prayer, worship and learning the Good News. Is our life together attractive so that people long to know Jesus too.

In a moment I am going to ask God to send the Holy Spirit and release his power upon us too and make us into Pentecost People.