

I'm going to talk to you this morning about Acts chapter 2, the first reading we heard this morning, and in particular this, thing, called the Holy Spirit. I want to tell you what the Holy Spirit means to me but more importantly I want to talk about what it can mean to us as a church, or indeed a group of four churches, and where the Holy Spirit can help us go.

In last week's reading you may remember that one of the last things Jesus said to the disciples was, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." So the disciples by the time we get to Pentecost knew what was coming. Jesus had told them that they would receive power, help, strength, courage, from this thing called the Holy Spirit.

And it's worth just looking at how it came; how the Holy Spirit came. The beginning of Acts chapter 2. "When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. "That's important isn't it. Jesus' disciples were not scattered around all over the place. They were all together in one place. That is so important. We come together on a Sunday morning and meet together in church and worship God together. "and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." Can you imagine being in a room which is suddenly filled with a sound like a violent wind? It's not a strong wind. The disciples are not suddenly getting blown around all over the place. The room is filled with the sound.

Clearly something is happening. "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." This group who were together, received the power of the Holy Spirit individually. They could share that moment. Perhaps if they had been apart and each had received this experience, I think there is every possibility that they will be thinking but what just happened? Did I imagine it? They were together. They could reassure each other that what they had experienced collectively through the sound and individually through the flame had really happened. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the spirit gave them ability." This amazing thing that happened, they were instantly able to do something that they were not able to do before.

Wow! There are certain stories in the Bible that we read or we hear read it which are increasingly familiar to us and we enjoy hearing. I don't think we can ever tire of hearing the story of the first Christmas. Some of the miracle stories are music to our ears when we hear them over and over again. Turning the water into wine at the wedding at Cana, the healing of the man lowered through the roof because his friends could not get him to Jesus, the feeding of the 5000, these are wonderful stories that we love to hear and we believe happened. But when we get to this end of the story of Jesus' life on earth we come to the big issues. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the central story which makes up our Christian faith. But the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples is the story that tells us how God expects us to carry the story on.

The problem is to what extent do we really believe that the power of the Holy Spirit is available to each and every one of us today? I think, or at least I hope, that we all believe it could be available to us but do we really trust it to deliver? The Holy Spirit gives us the power to deliver – it doesn't do it for us.

When the Holy Spirit first came to Peter in Jerusalem Peter stood up and addressed the crowd. And we are told later in Acts that the crowd were "cut to the heart" by why they had heard and the crowd came to Peter and the other disciples and they asked, "What should we do.?" I wonder how many of this crowd had been screaming for the death of Jesus not that long ago, and they were now wanting to commit themselves to being followers of Jesus, and Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" and here's the best bit, "and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And about three thousand people said Yes to Jesus.

There's the promise that applies just as much to you and me today as it did to those 3000 people in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. Commit yourself to being a follower of Jesus and you will be given the Holy Spirit, we are told.

So what? What does that mean in practice? OK so Jesus' disciples, we know what they went off and did – the Acts of the Apostles is full of stories of what Peter and Philip did, and later as they followed Jesus, we heard about what Paul and Barnabas and Timothy and John did – but that was all then wasn't it. Perhaps the Holy Spirit was just for then, not now.

I think to answer that we have to understand what it is that the Holy Spirit does for us. Back in the book of Exodus we find the story of Moses leading the people of Israel to the promised land – the promised land being that place that God had promised Abraham would be available for all his descendants – this was after Moses had led the people out of Egyptian slavery and Moses had received the 10 commandments from God. Now in Old Testament times the Spirit of God was not universally available – God made it available to certain people at certain times. And as the Israelites were preparing leave Sinai God reassured Moses that they would be OK by saying, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." That's what the Holy Spirit was giving them – God's presence.

When the disciples received the Holy Spirit what they then had was God's presence – so they felt able to do what God was calling them to do.

Seventeen hundred years later someone else felt God's presence in a similar way. As a young man, John Wesley served faithfully as an Anglican priest, but was never certain of his salvation. After spectacularly failing as a missionary in Georgia in the United States, he returned to England exhausted and depressed. That was until, on the 24th May 1738, he reluctantly attended a Moravian worship meeting in Aldersgate Street, London. It was to transform his life. That night, feeling his 'heart strangely warmed', his rigid religion was replaced by a deep assurance of God's loving presence.

Wesley would go on to be used by God to transform the lives of many thousands of men and women who heard him preach, and to inaugurate a worldwide Methodist movement that today numbers 70 million. The Holy Spirit clearly at work bringing God's presence to someone and guiding John Wesley in the direction God wanted him to go.

So do we feel God's presence with us today? Let me be honest with you – there are times when I do and there are also times when I don't. Thinking of those times when I do feel his presence I think they can mostly be grouped into three groups. The first group is when I feel I am truly worshipping God. For me that is most likely to be when I am in a large venue, with a worship band, a large group of worshippers, and singing worship songs or hymns. But there have also been times when Kate and I have led worship in a small home group and really felt God's presence. And I fully accept that for some people an organ, a choir, and traditional hymns would make them feel in God's presence. But our worship should always enable people to feel God's presence. The second group is when I have my quiet time with God. I vary what I do during my quiet time, because for me that is important. If I start to recognise that I am not feeling God's presence during my quiet time, for me that is the time to change something. But again for others, they have followed the same pattern for many years and that works for them. Feeling God's presence when we pray and read our bibles is again vital – if our prayer time and bible reading becomes a chore – then change something.

And the third group is when I ask for God's help and he gives it. I ask for God's help for all sorts of things I have to do – and if the thing I have asked for help for is something that God wants me to be doing then He will help. He will. He always will. The tricky bit is realising that God has given you that help – you haven't sorted it by yourself. But when I realise that has happened it is a truly wonderful feeling.

And when I don't feel God's presence is when the converse to these three things happen. Perhaps my worship is not what God requires. Perhaps my prayer time has been cut short for a poor reason, or perhaps just hasn't happened at all. Or perhaps I have just tried to sort my life out by myself.

But – let me say this. Whether or not we feel God's presence at any one time is not due to the availability of the Holy Spirit – it is down to us realising that the Holy Spirit is with us, and whether or not we believe that to be the case, and whether or not we are willing and wanting to ask for help.

When empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter preached to the crowd and three thousand people became followers of Jesus. That same Holy Spirit is with us today, and wanting to help. So we must do with it what Peter did. He used the power, the presence it gave him to tell people about Jesus.

I heard a brilliant analogy of what the Holy Spirit can be like the other day. The speaker was talking about the Dead Sea, and how water flows into the Dead Sea to make sure that it remained wet, but because there is no outlet for water in the Dead Sea, there is nowhere for the salt to go and so everything in it dies.

The Holy Spirit is here and ready and willing to flow into us – but if we give it no outlet, if we don't use that Holy Spirit within us, that Spirit will die in us – we will have no sense of God's Presence.

So, we must first accept the Holy Spirit in each of us, individually and collectively, and then we must use the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives us to spread the word of Jesus Christ. It is our job to build this church – to build God's church here in this village. That may require us to do things differently as a church. It may take us completely outside our comfort zones. It may mean that we get involved in doing something that we simply think we cannot do – but with the Holy Spirit we can.

If we had a screen here this morning I would finish by showing you a clip from one of my favourite, and possibly one of the most ridiculous, films made – and that is the film *Sister Act*. For those of you who don't know it Whoopi Goldberg plays a nightclub singer called Deloris Van Cartier, who witnesses a murder and goes into a hiding in a convent. There she is given, by the mother superior superbly played by Maggie Smith, the choir who are, in those own words, truly dreadful – the choir who believe Deloris is actually a nun called Sister Mary Clarence. Deloris transforms the choir so that they can sing a traditional piece beautifully, but then go on to sing a massively rocked up version of the piece – and this is the key – to the horror of the Mother Superior, but to the real interest of people outside the church who hear the music, and come in to find out. Yes a ridiculous plot.

But is that not what we, with the power of the Holy Spirit need to be doing – use that power to find ways of either bringing people into our churches, or taking the gospel to them. The alternative is, like the Dead Sea, we probably will die.

Let's pray.

Lord, we've all heard stories of movements of your Spirit throughout history and around the world today. Would you do it again in our church and in our community. Lord God, pour out Your Holy Spirit once more!

Readings: acts 2: 1-14

Title: The Holy Spirit – use it or lose it

St Laurence's Foxton
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Amen