

10.15 am HC

9 June 2019

Acts 2: 1-21; Romans 8: 14-17;

John 14: 8-17, 25-27

Pentecost: Planning and Power

My title this morning is Planning and Power- which is rather pleasing since they both start with the same letter as Pentecost. And that's where we will begin- Pentecost- though I hope that Planning and Power will both become evident as I speak.

When I was growing up we always referred to today as Whit Sunday, and to the whole season as Whitsun- Philip Larkin immortalising the late Spring in England in his poem *The Whitsun Weddings*...But in recent times we have reclaimed the name of the Jewish festival on which the momentous events of our reading from Acts fell: **Pentecost**.

The timing of this, as we shall see, is by no means accidental, just as the timing of Jesus' death at the feast of Passover was not accidental, but a fulfilment of all that the festival stood for and pointed to. You might even say it was planned!

50 days after the death of Jesus, 50 days after the Passover festival, Jesus's followers are gathered in Jerusalem, just as he told them before he returned to heaven, praying and waiting for the Power he had promised them. And now it is the feast of Pentecost.

Which has the number 50 in its name: because for the Jewish people this festival recalled a special point in their **exodus** journey, 50 days after they'd escaped from Egypt, at the first Passover)

At that point, 50 days on, travelling and camping in the wilderness, Moses goes up Mount Sinai to pray. He comes down carrying the two stone tablets of the Law- what we know as the Ten Commandments, the instructions given by God to show the people how to live out their new freedom.

Fifty days in, it's time to give shape and stability to their life together, to ensure they are living God's way, which will protect the freedom and well-being of them all. Fifty days on they need a reminder-

as we all do- which is why, 49 days on from Easter morning we are still saying '*Alleluia!*' in our services. But back to the ten commandments...

If followed, God's guidelines enable communities to function so that all are protected and can thrive, from the oldest to the youngest, the weakest to the most powerful, in relationships of love and respect. And the original giving of the ten commandments was commemorated in the feast of Pentecost.

Later on, Pentecost also became a Harvest festival, the celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest, so vital to providing people's daily bread. Just as receiving the ten commandments was the first step for God's people to living fully free lives- so one sheaf of wheat, the first fruits, would be offered to God in thanksgiving and as a prayer for the full harvest to come in.

I hope you are already beginning to see the parallels with what we celebrate today- the Holy Spirit given to the believers at Pentecost.

After the risen Jesus went up the mountain and ascended to Heaven, what was given to the people who waited below was not the law of Moses but the Holy Spirit: God's guide for living, written on human hearts, his living power on the inside. A *relationship* through which all the previous *rules* are both fulfilled and surpassed.

And the Holy Spirit then becomes the **first fruits** of all that is to come as our lives bear fruit for God to feed and nourish us and others with spiritual daily bread.

But there's more. Just as Jesus' death is the new *Passover*- with the one spotless Lamb of God being sacrificed to rescue us from slavery to sin and from the power of death, so now the giving of the Holy Spirit is the new *Pentecost*, when Jesus' followers receive power to become God's children and to live with him and for him.

So that's the **planning**. We know that God's salvation plan is perfect because his power is greater than all the schemes of man, than all the evil and violence that humankind has wrought. My brothers and sisters, we who worship God today are all part of that wonderful plan!

This past week's commemoration of D Day have brought us plenty of food for thought in terms of planning – from the mulberry harbours trialled on Scottish tidal beaches, to highly-trained parachute regiments and fearless resistance operatives....This week has evoked poignant memories, and deep gratitude for the freedom we enjoy, thanks to the sacrifice of so many.

But D Day was also about **power**- the way the greater airpower and manpower of the Allies was able to conquer the occupying Nazi forces in France, and also the **power of prayer**.

On Thursday it was my turn to lead prayers at lunchtime in St John's and I read the prayer of Franklin D Roosevelt- not knowing as I planned it that my good idea would have been gazumped by the current US President and widely televised.

But this remarkable prayer bears listening to more than once, so I make no apology for quoting it again now.

On 6 June 1944, in his address to the nation, Roosevelt acknowledges that the power of human beings is given to them by God as he prays for the young American servicemen:

Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith.

He also recognises that their struggle is part of a larger battle for freedom and peace and he closes.

With thy blessing we shall prevail.... Thy will be done, Almighty God. Amen.

Planning and Power. Thus, aided by God's power and mercy, *D Day* became the first great step in the liberation of Europe and the ending of the second world war.

Pentecost is the first great step in God's liberation of his people, originally the Jews rescued from slavery in Egypt and now, at the new Pentecost, all humanity, liberated through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Like D Day it is an extraordinary explosion of power, beginning with a few and spreading out far and wide to bring the good news of Jesus to all nations. This is a multi-lingual and multi media event, which those present would never forget- including Luke, who captured it all in its unique detail.

Planning and power – that’s the big picture. But just as the brave D Day veterans have reminded us this week, of how their experiences changed their lives, so too for us Pentecost must be personal, not just historical or even theological.

So I want to close with a few words about what happened, and what difference it makes to you and me as Christians today.

There came wind and fire from heaven, both of which brought life, not destruction. And all those present were ‘filled with the Holy Spirit.’

This is a phrase which can cause alarm and concern, perhaps because on this first occasion the outward signs were somewhat dramatic!

But as Christians we are all given the Holy Spirit, the presence of God in our lives, when we are baptised, and when we trust in Jesus as our Saviour. In baptism, we believe the water is a sign of the Holy Spirit’s blessing on the baby, child or adult who is either sprinkled with it or plunged into it, if it’s immersion baptism. When we are confirmed, the Bishop lays hands on us and says, ‘Confirm O Lord, your servant- Steve or Ann or Carol or Tom - with your Holy Spirit.’

However, we don’t automatically experience the Holy Spirit’s power in our lives, and the Spirit may still be a rather vague part of our understanding of God. Maybe this illustration will help you, as it has me:

It’s as if our Christian lives are gas boilers– and there is a pilot light burning all the time, but when we need to use the boiler, for example to power radiators or heat water then, it receives an injection of power, is fired up, and the whole thing bursts into life... In my experience, receiving the Holy Spirit can feel a bit like being fired up, suddenly becoming more alive and aware of God, and able to live with him and for him in a new way.

On the Day of Pentecost, when Jesus’ followers were fired up for action, to share God’s love and the message of Jesus, the church was born!

Thus Peter, fired up and filled with the Spirit, stood up and spoke the words God gave him, with incredible power and fluency, as a result of which thousands of people from many countries heard it, became Christians and took the gospel message out from Jerusalem back to their homelands.

Peter quoted the Old Testament prophet Joel:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy

your young men shall see visions

your old men shall dream dreams....

That Pentecost promise still holds true today, whatever our age or gender, whether we have been Christians for many years or are just finding our way. We may have known the Spirit's power in our lives in days gone by, but not recently- will you open your lives afresh to God today?

You may never have experienced the Spirit's presence and power or never thought this was for you, but it is.

God knows and loves us so well, and wants his Spirit to fill our hearts and minds with his peace, joy and purpose. He will never force that power upon us, but he waits lovingly for us to be willing to receive this precious gift.

So may we now, as we celebrate Pentecost here in St Brandon's this morning, take a moment in prayer to silently wait for the Spirit to come.

You may like to close your eyes, and you may like to open your hands as a sign that you are trusting God for his promise, just as we do when we come to Communion.

Let us pray, *Come, Holy Spirit.*

Come to us today and fill us with your power

and generous love.

Amen

