

Brancepeth sermon
8 June 2025

Acts 2:1-21
John 14:8-27
Psalm 104:24-35

*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

So, today is the Day of Pentecost.

And the word ‘Pentecost’ simply means ‘fiftieth’ in Greek;
it’s the fiftieth day after the Passover, in the Jewish calendar
and is itself another Jewish festival,
the ‘festival of weeks’ or ‘Shavuot’.

And so, like Passover, it is a day when Jews from all over the world
would gather in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast.

We celebrate it in the Christian church
because of the story we heard from Acts:
the story of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the disciples
when they were all gathered together in one house.

And Christians around the world also know it as the day
when a sacrificial victim from the congregation
is made to take on the assault course of reading that story
with its list of all the places that members of the crowd
had come from –

Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia and ... all the rest
(and thank you, Colin, for taking on that challenge this year).

But it is also, because of that same story,
the day in the church's year when we think most directly
about the Holy Spirit,
and about what it means for the Spirit to be poured out upon us.

What is the Spirit for?

What does the Spirit do?

Well, one answer we could give is that the Spirit's work is
to help us see God.

At the beginning of our reading from John,

Philip says to Jesus,

'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'

And he is perhaps saying,

'Lord, show us that we've not made a mistake.

We've left our families and our homes.

We've followed you wherever you have led.

We've tried to live by your teachings.

We've endured the opposition that your ministry has generated.

Can you please show us that it's not all been a fantasy?

Can you show us that it's not all been a whim or a mistake?

Can you show us that God really is with us?

It would be so much easier to keep going

If we could hear a voice calling to us from a burning bush,

or see a pillar of fire following us around

as we journey through the wilderness

or thunder and lightning crashing out on the mountain top –

or *something, anything* to help us see for certain

that we really are walking in God's way.

'*Please*', he says, 'show us God, show us the Father,

and we will be satisfied!'

And as I read it, Jesus gives *two* answers.

His first answer is, simply, 'Philip: you've got *me*'.

I *am* the burning bush;

I *am* the pillar of fire;

I *am* the lightning on the mountain top.

Why are you looking for some other sign of God's presence?

Yes, God *is* with you, and yes, you *can* see God –

because *I*, Jesus, am with you, and you can see *me*!

Haven't you learnt by now that

that should be enough for you?

But then Jesus carries on –

perhaps with an eye to those like us who will come after Philip,

and who won't get to walk the road with Jesus by our side,

won't get literally to see, hear and touch him.

And his second answer is that he will send the *Holy Spirit*,
and that the Holy Spirit will
teach his disciples everything about Jesus,
and remind them of all that Jesus has said to them.

The Holy Spirit will come
to bring Jesus to their minds
even when Jesus is not there physically in front of them;
the Spirit will bring Jesus to their minds,
will help them imagine him,
help them to know him,
help them cling to him,
even after he has ascended, and is hidden from their sight.

The Spirit *will* show them Jesus -
and by doing so *will* show them God.

So how can Jesus' disciples see God?

How can they know that God is with them,
that the way they are on is God's way?

By having the Spirit working within them
bringing Jesus to their minds,

prompting their hearts to hold on to Jesus,
shaping their wills so that they carry on following him.

There's a famous passage in John Wesley's journal,
describing one of the key moments that
propelled him into a life of ministry.

It was the 24th May 1738, and he writes that

'In the evening I went *very unwillingly*

to a society in Aldersgate Street, where [some]one was reading

Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

About a quarter before nine,

while he was describing the change which God works in the heart
through faith in Christ,

I felt my heart strangely warmed.

I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation;

and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins,
even mine,

and saved me from the law of sin and death.'

That 'heart strangely warmed' within him –

that sense growing within him that he *could* trust in Jesus,

that Jesus was *for* him, had *hold* of him,
was saving him from sin and death –
that was Wesley's burning bush,
that was his pillar of fire,
that was his flame on the mountain top:
the Spirit of God working within him,
enabling him to see Jesus, and so to see God.
'An assurance was given me', he says –
a sense of peace, of trust, of clarity –
that was the testimony of the Spirit in his heart.

But I don't want to stop there.

That story of Wesley's is about what was going on
in his own individual heart –
something personal to him,
an experience that was his alone,
and it's not necessarily an experience that all of us will have.

But our other reading, the reading from Acts,
suggests that the Spirit works in *other* ways than this as well.

And the bit of the reading that I mean is precisely the bit that involves the verbal assault course that Colin got through so impressively – that huge list of regions and nationalities.

Because one way of understanding what is going on in that story, understanding what the Spirit was doing, in and through the disciples, on that first day of Pentecost is that the Spirit was rewriting the story of the Tower of Babel.

You probably remember that story, from Genesis 11: the people of the earth, united by a single language, are all gathered together in one place, and they say, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens.’

These are people who have no doubts about whether they are walking in the right way, whether their journey makes sense.

They see no need to ask, like Philip, to see God in order to be satisfied.

They are confident that they have everything in hand themselves.

And then God, appalled by their arrogance, says,

‘Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there,
so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’

And so the people,
all of them now suddenly speaking different languages,
each of them no longer able to understand what
most people around them are saying,
end up scattering across the face of the earth,
their great project forgotten.

It’s a story, I think, that the Israelites used
to explain to themselves why there were
so many differences between people,
why there was so much division and mutual incomprehension
in the world that they inhabited –
the world that *we* inhabit –
the divisions that are such an *obvious* of
the world that we inhabit.

But when the Spirit comes at Pentecost,
poured out on the disciples in the house where they were sitting,
the Spirit *undoes* or *overcomes* this story.

We get told that there were in Jerusalem people
from every nation under heaven –
representatives of all the people scattered from Babel
now gathered together again in one place,
representatives of all the divided and mutually suspicious
peoples of the earth,
speakers of all the divided languages of humankind.

And yet each one of them heard from the disciples
a word spoken in their own native language.

‘In our own languages’, they say, ‘we hear them speaking
about God’s deeds of power!’

In our own languages, that is, we hear them speaking about
what God has done in Jesus,
about what Jesus taught, what he did, what he underwent,
and about God raising him from the dead.

In the midst of a divided world,
in the midst of a world criss-crossed by hostilities,
in the midst of a world of mutually incomprehensible languages,

the Spirit creates *communication*,
the Spirit creates *understanding*,
the Spirit creates *connection*,
the Spirit *joins people together*.

The Spirit doesn't wipe away the differences between people
– this is not a story in which everyone is
miraculously given the *same* language to speak;
the Spirit doesn't simply reverse the story of Babel in that way –
but the Spirit enables people to understand one another
across their differences;
the Spirit creates *sharing*,
the Spirit creates the possibility of *community*,
a community that *includes* differences
rather than being broken by them,
a *multicultural* community,
a *multicoloured* community.

The Spirit creates the possibility of *life together*
in and with and through all our human variety.

And so, perhaps, it is when we see *that* happening,
when we see such real sharing across differences,
when we see the breaking down of walls of hostility,
when we see the community of the followers of Jesus,
welcoming people of all languages, all backgrounds,
all ages, all colours, all ethnicities,
all classes, all genders, all sexualities,
all types of body and all types of mind –
when we see the community of the followers of Jesus
learning to communicate across all those differences –
well, *that* is our burning bush,
that is the pillar of fire beside our camp,
that is our thunder and lightning on the mountain top:
because *that* is when and how we know that God is with us –
because it is how the Holy Spirit
gathers us around Jesus,
and shows us the face of the Father. *Amen*