

THE PENTECOST READING: Acts 2.1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

READING: Romans 8.14-17

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

GOSPEL READING: John 14.8-17

Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

Pentecost Sunday! This is the day when we celebrate the beginning of the church.

For those of you who haven't been around churches for long, I'm going to give you a bit of background. We heard the start of the story at the beginning of the service. But there's so much more that happened that day! Please read the rest of the story this week, especially if you've never heard it before. It's amazing! If you don't have a Bible, just Google Acts chapter 2.

Pentecost was originally a Jewish festival. People would travel from all over the ancient world to Jerusalem to be part of the celebrations. And this is what was happening at the time of our first reading.

But the disciples weren't out there joining in, they were in a house, praying, trying to make

sense of everything that had happened to them.

They had followed Jesus for 3 years. Then he was killed. Then he came back from the dead and popped in and out of their lives for a while. Finally, they saw him return to his heavenly kingdom and they knew they would never see him again.

But that morning, something happened. It's a dramatic story; tongues of flame on their heads, rushing winds, and they started to speak in all different languages. Of course, the very religious pilgrims outside thought there was a party going on and the alcohol was flowing!

But they hadn't been drinking. They had been filled with the Spirit.

3000 people decided to follow Jesus that day, from all over the known world.

Jesus had told the disciples to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. But I'm pretty sure at that point they had no idea what to expect.

So, the disciples were in a house somewhere in Jerusalem, probably pretty unsure of themselves, a bit frightened, feeling a lack of control about what was going to happen, if anything, and what the future might hold.

And this sense of fear, this insecurity, is like a magnet for the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, when we feel most out of our depth, that's when the Holy Spirit shows up. It seems like if we can let go of our need to impress and control and succeed, the Holy Spirit has room to breathe.

I'm going to tell you a story. It's the closest thing I've ever experienced to the first Pentecost, and it's nowhere near as dramatic, but it made a difference to the course of my life.

It was a few years ago, before I'd even started thinking about doing ministry in any official capacity! I was going to the church at Lenton Abbey, St Barnabas. One Sunday morning a Chinese lady wandered in. Then she came back the next Sunday with a friend. Then there were a whole group of them. They were professors from China, and they were at the university for a few months. They had never encountered church before, or heard of Jesus. But they wanted to know more. They asked questions. They started reading the Bible. Eventually, I realised they

would only be with us for 6 more weeks. So a friend and I started meeting with them each week, teaching them and trying to answer their questions the best we could. We often came a bit unstuck; they had very tricky questions! One of the trickiest questions they asked was about how much time we spent each day reading the Bible! Not as much as them! They were spending around 5-6 hours a day reading the Bible. They were underlining bits, and writing notes, and asking all the questions.

A couple of weeks into this, they started asking about the Holy Spirit. How do we get the Holy Spirit? they asked. They were really engaged with trying to understand the Christian faith, but they were also desperate to actually experience the presence of God in

their own lives and hearts, just like the first disciples of Jesus.

This freaked me out! The problem with the Holy Spirit is that you don't get to manipulate or control what happens. But they were relentless. Yes, we understand all this, but when do we get the Holy Spirit?!

Eventually, I realised that I couldn't duck it any longer. I knew I had no idea what I was doing, but I thought, well you place your hands on them and pray. That's what they did in the early church.

So one warm day in early summer, we were all together in a house in Beeston. I showed them a short video about the Holy Spirit because it was easy to understand, and had Chinese subtitles. Any questions? I asked.

There was only one. Can we have the Holy Spirit now?

I was deeply uncomfortable. What if nothing happened? What if something happened? Both scenarios were scary. But I knew we had to go for it. It was all up to the Holy Spirit now.

We went outside in the garden. We like gardens, they explained. We don't have gardens in China. I was hoping the neighbours weren't in! They gathered round, and my friend and I placed our hands on each of them and prayed for them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We took our time. We just waited for Holy Spirit to come.

And one by one, they lit up from the inside. Their demeanour changed. They were filled with joy. It's hard to describe what I was

seeing. It was very quiet, very peaceful, and very tangible. There was no rushing wind, or tongues of fire, and yet fire was lit inside each one of them, and God breathed the Spirit into them. It was a moment of holiness, a time when we knew for certain God was present and meeting with us.

After we finished praying, they couldn't stop talking. They were full of excitement. There was no doubt in their minds that God had given them what they had kept asking for. They experienced real joy and peace.

All I could think was, well thank goodness God showed up!

I stayed behind for half an hour or so to help clear up. And when I left I could see them all at the end of the road, still really excited, still

talking at the top of their voices! The party hadn't ended!

I never saw them again. They went back to China. But they went back with Bibles, as much Chinese Christian literature as I could lay my hands on, and full of the Holy Spirit.

And if you ever go to St Barnabus Church at Lenton Abbey, there are some Chinese bells on the left-hand side of the church near the front. A gift from those professors. When you ring them, pray for us, they asked. And, even now, when I go into that church I ring those little bells and pray for them, and all who live in countries where it's hard to be a Christian.

I was scared during those weeks with them. I felt completely inadequate when it came to teaching them about Jesus; and then when

they read in the Bible about the Holy Spirit and asked for that, I honestly had no idea what I was doing. I felt completely out of control and vulnerable.

I was as clueless as those early disciples. And just as on that Pentecost day long ago, the Holy Spirit showed up.

We don't get to control God; and the Holy Spirit is God, just as Jesus is. That can be scary. It can put us in positions where we feel insecure. But the Holy Spirit always comes with love and joy and peace. Always looking for ways into our lives; to transform us, to give us life. The Spirit is what makes us family, children of God.

So I want to end by taking a few moments of quiet, and inviting the Holy Spirit to

encounter us here, today, as we are;
together, in one place.

Come Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit here with us now

Thank you for breathing your love and life
within us, and between us.

Empower us to live our lives, full of your
presence.

Amen