

WHAT IS THIS GIFT?

Acts 2. 1-21

1 Corinthians 12. 3b-13

John 20. 19-23

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Pentecost is one of those Christian Festivals that, in retrospect, we talk about as if it were totally normal. But it is actually utterly bizarre! And I should imagine that the first disciples were just as perplexed as we are when we think deeply about the event.

I wonder how the disciples were feeling that first Pentecost morning? They were all gathered together in one place. What a few weeks they had experienced! Entering Jerusalem with our Lord to a hero's welcome; seeing Jesus arrested and falsely tried; the people of Jerusalem turning against him, baying for his blood; Christ tortured and crucified, dying an agonising death; running away, only to hear about the resurrection; then coming face to face with our Lord in the flesh again. Then spending another month with him doing what, no-one really knows. Then the Ascension into heaven. The disciples must have been so confused, so emotionally exhausted, not knowing what on earth was coming next.

So here we find them, gathered together, and it is Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish festival, a major festival first recorded in Deuteronomy (16. 9-12), a celebration of the harvest. And the disciples were back together again to celebrate Pentecost, perhaps looking forward to the stability of a religious festival that they all knew so well; ready to meet with God as they always had done.

But things are different now, and God uses this moment to fulfil his promise and send the Holy Spirit upon them. The disciples were together, probably praying, and

a wind like a tornado fills the house; tongues of fire rest on each believer, and they begin speaking uncontrollably in tongues. The scene was so bizarre that there could only be one, rational conclusion: the crowds of people around them thought that they were drunk. But no. Peter assures them all that what they are experiencing is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the gift of God to the early church (and to us too, of course).

Now, I'm sure that we have all received some strange gifts in our time - at Christmas or on birthdays - and we have to smile graciously and pretend we are happy with them. But here was one gift from God that no-one knew what to do with. What on earth was the Holy Spirit given to them for? And, crucially, why does God give us the Holy Spirit in our church community here at St Stephen's?

Well, let's think through the options.

Some people would believe that God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to energise the Church and make it more exciting. Let's be honest: sometimes, Church is not the most exciting activity in the world, is it? Few of us would come here for the thrill of the ride each Sunday! If we are looking for excitement, there are better places to go and better hobbies to undertake. And yet it seems to me that some Christians and churches treat the Holy Spirit as if it is a gift to make the Church a more exciting and energised place to be.

Now there is some truth in this, of course. It is indeed the Holy Spirit who energises us; and it is indeed the Holy Spirit who inspires us and stirs us up for mission. But he is not a gift from God to make Church a place of excitement in the sense that we should come here for entertainment. Instead, the energy and excitement that the Holy Spirit brings is for a different purpose altogether. And to see that, we need to look both sides of the Pentecost story to grasp its context.

Immediately *before* the story of Pentecost comes the story of the choosing of Matthias (Acts 1. 12-26) as an apostle to replace Judas who had fallen away from the faith. Given the fact that the disciples had committed that decision to prayer, we are confident that the Holy Spirit was in that decision-making process. And immediately *after* the story of Pentecost (Acts 2. 43-47), we have the story of how the early Church conducted itself in terms of community living: developing communal ideas, and joining together in worship and prayer daily. Given the fact that this comes immediately after the Pentecost event, we are confident that the Holy Spirit was in this new way of forming godly community. So it seems to me that the gift of the Holy Spirit to energise and excite is directly related to how we organise Church and how we organise our structures and corporate life together.

There is nothing boring or lifeless about the institution of the Church; but there is something intensely boring and lifeless about *institutionalism* in the Church. What do I mean by that? Well, when the Holy Spirit of God is energising and exciting the institution of the Church, it is, by definition, a lively place to be. But when the Holy Spirit of God is excluded and people just cling on to structures for the sake of structures, then the institution is sold out for the sake of institutionalism which, by definition, is lifeless and bland. So we must always be mindful of allowing the Holy Spirit to breathe through the institution and structures of St Stephen's Church. When we do that, our structuring will be energised, our worship will be lively, our mission activity will be meaningful and it will transform our community. The Holy Spirit excites and energises: not so that we can be entertained, but so that we can be a mission-oriented Church both structurally and in terms of the activities we undertake.

For others, the Holy Spirit is a gift of power. It is true that in the gospels, Jesus had promised: 'When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall receive power.' But there is appropriate and inappropriate power with regard to the Church.

The time was, of course, when the Church was one of the most powerful institutions in society: the Church lay behind political decisions, the Church lay behind economic policy and the legal system, and the Church determined community values. But it would not be true to say that the Church holds that sort of sway in this day and age. Some people may lament the passing of those times. I think it is inappropriate for the Church to have (or demand) power just because it is the Church and it has money and influence.

Christ did promise that the Holy Spirit would confer power on the Church, but not that sort of power. The power the Church has is power that is born out of brokenness, not strength. The power that the Church has is a prophetic influence, not a dictatorial role. The power that the Church has is worked out through counter-cultural behaviour, not dictating the mainstream of society. And so it is appropriate, in the Holy Spirit, for us to seek power: not the power of domination or overt influence, but the power of prophetic weakness. This type of power shows the way of the Cross as the way to life.

We have seen that the Holy Spirit is the gift of energy and excitement; and that the Holy Spirit is the gift of power. It can also be said that the Holy Spirit is the gift of the word.

The Holy Spirit is the gift of a message to proclaim. One of the central images of the Pentecost event, as we have heard from our reading, is the fact that the silence was broken and the believers began speaking in tongues. Those who were there heard the Gospel message being proclaimed in their own tongue. It was the Holy Spirit who gave the Church something to say. As Peter explained the Pentecost phenomenon to people, he drew their attention to the prophecy of Joel (2. 28) in the Old Testament. God declares, ‘then afterwards I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy...’ The Church has a message

about the Good News of Jesus Christ; and it is a message that we do not proclaim in our own strength, but in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the words to say.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is ultimately a gift, not only to the Church, but to the whole world. Yes, we are energised and excited; not so we can be entertained, but so that we can fruitfully engage in mission. Yes, we are empowered; not so that we can rule over society, but so that we can draw people, by our example, to the Cross. And ultimately through the Holy Spirit, we are given a voice and a message to proclaim so that the whole world will hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ.

At St Stephen's, may we resolve to be a 'Pentecost Church': a Church that is empowered and structured for mission; a Church that is broken for mission; and a Church that has a prophetic word to bring to the world. That is the Spirit of Pentecost that we celebrate today - and that is the Spirit we are called to embrace in all our activities and ministries: the Spirit of energy, the Spirit of power, and the Spirit of prophecy. The Holy Spirit of God.

Amen.