

Based on Acts 2:1-21

**Pentecost then! New life! Sudden, unmerited, irresistible new life!**

That's the message that we get from the Acts description of Pentecost and it appears in other forms in the other listed readings for today. In Psalm 104 for example, the main event of Pentecost concerns God's gift of the Spirit which gives life to the church. The church lives *only* because of the gift of God's Spirit.

The Feast of Pentecost or 'Weeks', as it is known in the Old Testament, marked the end of the celebration of the Spring harvest, a cycle that began with Passover and during which devout Israelite families praised God for grace and generosity. Pentecost was also the beginning of a period lasting until the Autumn Festival of Booths in which the first fruits of the fields were sacrificed to God. And among some of the Jews, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost was seen as a time to renew their covenant with God.

So there has always been a great significance for this time that we celebrate as Pentecost. It is a pause, a time of anticipation in the life of the people of God and in their relationship *with* God. Pentecost means leaving the past and moving into the beginning of a new existence. Pentecost is marked by a heavenly sound like a rushing wind and by descending fire and transformed speech. It seems like the events were not properly describable in any customary *human* words. A rushing wind – a breath from God?

Sorry to momentarily stray from the Acts reading but in Ezekiel 37:1-14 but it is relevant to our Acts passage. There is a vision of a valley of dry bones. Ezekiel takes a while to realise that the vision refers to the re-establishment of the exiled people of Israel in their homeland but the text builds to the point when God says: "*Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon these slain that they may live.*" And we are told "*breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*" God tells the whole of Israel that their graves will open and they will be brought up and God says: "*I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live.*" The wind or breath comes from the Hebrew word 'ruah' which can mean 'wind' or 'breath' or *Spirit*.

The events of Pentecost described in our reading should not really have come as a *surprise* to the people involved because *twice* in connection with Jesus' Ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit has *already* been promised. For example, in Acts 1:8 we read: "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.*"

And now it *happens* – to *all* of the disciples - and I think that we really need to understand the *enormity* of it! New life for the church! New life for individuals within the church! New life through the Spirit of God!

But this isn't like the Transfiguration described in Mark 9:2-13 where only a *few* close disciples are witnesses to the work of the Holy Spirit – this time it's EVERYBODY!

There's a great deal of change going on. Disciples are going to become Apostles - going out to continue the work started by Jesus.

We are told that the tongues of fire rest upon each of the disciples and then the crowd surges forward because each person has heard the disciples speaking his or her native language. Places across all of the then-known world are listed in the text, to reinforce the message that God's energy is touching everyone.

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Let's think again about 'wind' or 'breath'. The Hebrew word 'ruah'. What's special about a violent wind or someone's breath? Can we *see* the wind? Can we see the *effects* of the wind? – I certainly can when I am sea kayaking (again before too long hopefully!) It's not visible but my goodness it can make you work very hard and make you very aware of its presence!

Another feature of the Pentecost story is *flame* – tongues of flame. And I offer you an image that helps *me* to understand what happened in this *interchange* of Jesus in his earthly ministry and the evident, dramatic influence of the Holy Spirit in the Acts account. Jesus can be represented by a scented candle. He radiates light, warmth and a calming, healing presence. The candle gives up its life as it produces that light and warmth. But the same scent that is there alongside the candle flame is still present in the surrounding atmosphere when the *physical* presence of the candle has gone. Jesus stays with us through the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' farewell speeches in the Gospel of John relating to Pentecost, a Greek word 'parakletos' is used to describe the Spirit who comes on Easter Evening. This word has been translated variously as: *Counsellor, Comforter or Helper* and in the NRSV Bible the word *advocate* is used. But whichever word you prefer, there is no getting away from the fact that 14-17 of John's Gospel involve Jesus explaining that he is going to depart and that the immediate future will be a time of mission when his followers will be hated and persecuted. And so this *Counsellor, Comforter or Helper -or advocate, will be an advantage during the dangerous times.*

The physical presence of the candle may disappear when its time has come, but the Light of the World will still be present through the remaining 'scent' of what Jesus has already started.

The Spirit as Advocate will testify on Jesus' behalf. The Spirit, by working through the church, will expose the wrong in the world's way of doing things. And the third action of the Spirit promised in John's Gospel is particularly relevant to us and to our fellow Christians across the known world of modern times. It tells us that, although in human terms, we are historically removed from the physical presence of the Jesus that the disciples knew, we will be ok because we are quite clearly told that: "*The Spirit will guide you into all the truth*" (John 16:13)

We can see from the Acts text that some people mocked the idea of winds and fires and new life and wouldn't believe God's new initiatives. They attributed the events and the reactions of those affected to drunkenness. They conclude: "*This cannot be what it seems to be!*" But what it *seems* to be is precisely what it *is*. God's Spirit on the loose!

We can only hope that the mockers were amongst those who were later (in verse 37) "*cut to the heart*" by Peter's sermon. His sermon begins with a quotation from the prophet Joel (2:28-32a) and it transforms the image of Pentecost for us. The picture which from Joel's words appears as a forecast of destruction and death, has become, in Peter's sermon, an image and declaration of new life!

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For Joel, the signs of the outpouring of the Spirit are a prelude to disaster, but for Peter these wonders have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the greatest of God's wonders. And the purpose of these wonders, *Christ's purpose*, is nothing less than the redemption of humankind.

Peter, the man whose self-confidence was crushed by his own betrayal of Jesus.

Peter, the man who denies Jesus three times and then later has to tell the risen Jesus three times that he loves him.

Peter has been forgiven and healed *so well* by Jesus that he is transformed at Pentecost into the preacher of a wonderful life-declaring sermon that includes the words later in Acts: "*This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.*" And we are told in Acts 2:37 that people present were "*cut to the heart*".

Once again today, at Pentecost, the Spirit can enter our lives in ways that shatter our old expectations. It's not *death* that the Spirit brings but *new life*! And we should welcome the Counsellor, the Comforter, the Helper and the Advocate with arms and hearts wide open! Because our God loves us!

*"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"* Halleluyah!

Let's Pray:

*Lord, stay with us and open to us the mystery of your love, that our hearts may burn with wonder as we glimpse the awesome truth that life is sorrow and joy, darkness and light, cross and resurrection. For with you beside us, through the Holy Spirit, your hope amongst us and your truth within us, we shall not want in the hour of need. AMEN.*