

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

## **CELEBRATING THE SPIRIT**

**17<sup>th</sup> May 2015**

Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:18-27

When I was in the United States, many years ago now, I was aware that there were some churches who hosted an event called "Christmas in July." They weren't challenging the traditional celebration of Jesus' birth which has from time immemorial been marked in December, but they were saying that the gift of God's Son was so important that they wanted to think about it at a time of year when it wouldn't be wrapped around with all the dear traditions of Christmas time. So they held an alternative celebration in July and a traditional one in December. Maybe one of these years we might try that, for a change as well!

Today is not the day of Pentecost. Pentecost happens officially next Sunday, the fiftieth day after Easter – which is what "Pentecost" means. The word is the Greek term used for the Hebrew "Feast of Weeks", or Shavuot which is celebrated fifty days after the Passover, and marks the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. This is not Pentecost: the official day for celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit is next Sunday. However we have other plans for next Sunday, and it is no bad thing to mark the official day of Pentecost with the elders rather than the minister leading the worship: surely giving gifts to all God's children was what the coming of the Spirit was about! At the same time, I thought it would not be a good idea for us not to mark the gift of the Holy Spirit in some way, and so we are celebrating Pentecost today!

Pentecost is the celebration of God giving the Holy Spirit. But it is not named for that happening. Just as the word Easter has nothing to do with Jesus' resurrection, so the word Pentecost has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit. There was already a festival known as Pentecost before the day when the Spirit was given. So it is that when Luke says "When the day of Pentecost had come" he doesn't mean to give the day a name retrospectively, after the church had decided what to call that momentous day. No the day was already called Pentecost, at least by Greek speakers, marking the fifty days since the Passover. The day was already special, and it may well be that the embryonic church was gathered together in one place to pray before they went up to the temple to celebrate the giving of the Law with all the other Jews in Jerusalem.

And there would be a lot of other Jews in Jerusalem, quite apart from the usual residents and visitors. The Feast of weeks was a pilgrimage festival which accounts for the number of foreign Jews in Jerusalem that day. They had gathered to celebrate the giving of the Law, which was what marked God's people out from other folks. They had God's instructions given to them personally, through Moses, by God. They had a law which covered every aspect of their lives, and for this they thanked God. And the Law meant one thing above all, it meant order, it meant that there was a right way to do things and that way would be followed. Especially on this day of Pentecost.

And to that celebration of giving the Law, that celebration of what made the Jews special, came the Spirit of God, the wind blowing through the room where Jesus' followers were gathered, the strange phenomenon of tongues of flame resting on or over their heads. And for that day at least, they began to speak in other languages. They began to speak the praises of God. Luke doesn't tell us how or why they went from the place where they were assembled out into the street. Maybe they simply couldn't help themselves, so filled with wonder and joy were they that the room was suddenly too claustrophobic, the knowledge of God's love in Jesus simply too great to keep to themselves. When God's Spirit overwhelms a person, or a group of people this is often how it feels – you need space to run or leap or sing or somehow express your wonder and joy.

And so the celebration of the order given by the Law was taken over by what seemed like disorder given by God's Spirit. Only seemed like disorder, though. If in a busy city street suddenly up to one hundred and twenty people appear all speaking loudly, many of them in languages that you don't understand, (since it stands to reason that the local Jews there would not understand much of what the transformed disciples were saying if they were speaking other languages) then it would seem like disorder, it might even seem to be threatening, a matter of civil disorder,, or unrest. No wonder people were perplexed. We would be too, I think.

But God did not give his Spirit, which is himself, God did not come to empower his people and dwell amongst us just to perplex the world. And so Peter took the lead and spoke up, presumably in Aramaic again now, so that the most people could hear, or perhaps in Greek, and told the people what it was all about. He showed them how the very Law which they were honouring that day spoke of the time when God would send his Spirit on them, and he spoke of Jesus, that his death and resurrection was part of the plan of God for salvation. God sends his Spirit to give the church power, but not power for its own sake, not so that we can say “Look at us, aren't we great? Obey us, aren't we influential.” God gave his Spirit to his people to point the world to Jesus. It may have looked chaotic that day, but that was because it had nothing to do with laws. God was taking away the power of the Law that day and replacing it with the power of his own presence, within his people's hearts, helping them to make the right choices to live things his way. It wouldn't always looked the same any more, it would have more variety, more colour, you might say. It would be more lively, less restricted. It would give more glory to God and less to the person who was living for and with him.

We read about the day of Pentecost today, and we also read part of the wonderful eighth chapter of the letter of Paul to the Romans. Both talk about the Holy Spirit, one by showing us what happened on that day when the disciples were transformed, and one by giving us a bigger picture. Pentecost may be, is, the birthday of the church, but what God was doing both in sending Jesus and then in giving his children his Spirit was something that affects not only human beings, but the whole of creation.

Paul tells us that creation had been groaning as if in the pains of childbirth until the coming of the Spirit. The redemption that humanity needed and needs is not the only redemption needed. When we human beings fell from grace, whether you think that was literally when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, or whether you take that story as a metaphor for the wrong choices that each person makes, when we fell from grace our fall affected all of God's creation. Things which were designed to be perfect were set askew by fallen humanity. Some of this is directly due to our selfish choices – as we

can see with pollution or the scarring of the landscape by injudicious mining, or by the current climate change. Some of it is not due directly to our choices, but if humanity, the pinnacle of God's creation goes astray, everything else which God made loses part of its original purpose.

If you go to the Highland Folk Museum – or almost any museum actually – you will see implements and tools which have to have their purpose explained to us, because we no longer use them. These tools have lost their purpose, as human ingenuity has replaced them and life-styles have changed. In the same way we no longer know what God's original purposes for creation were, since we have changed the way he intended us to live with his world. Maybe if we had always lived in God's way we would know the point of the dreaded highland midge!

I don't mean to sound like a Luddite. One of the things that shows we are made in the image of God is the ingenuity of the human mind and our desire to make things and change things and do things differently. I believe that humankind was always meant to create and change things, but it is the way we have chosen to do so which has sometimes been at odds with God's plans, and so the whole of the world was, is, waiting for the redemption of humanity, for in that will come the redemption of all the world.

In the end what Paul is talking about is the new creation promised us at the end of this world. But he is also talking about the redeeming work of Jesus on the cross and the gift of God's Spirit to his people. God's Spirit puts us back into a right relationship with our creator, not the passive relationship of what is made to the maker, but the relationship of child to parent. God's Spirit does not always force people out onto the street speaking the praises of God in many languages, but he does always help us orientate our lives towards Jesus and away from our own selfishness. He does help us correct our choices, in the way that they affect other people and in the way they affect our souls, and in the way that they affect the rest of creation. The so-called "eco" message which is both lauded and mocked these days is a natural part of what it means to be redeemed Christians, bought back by the work of Christ on the cross.

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church and as such worth celebrating. But the work of the Holy Spirit didn't begin and end on that day. Jesus gave us his Spirit, so that in the wake of the resurrection we would be like him: forgiving, making communities of acceptance, being living stones, and allowing his presence with us to help us live to his praise and in his way everyday. Pentecost means that the word of God's good news is set loose in the world, and that God is with us every day. Amen.

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