

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PENTECOST

15th May 2016

John 20:19-23

Acts 2:1-13

Pentecost is often called the birthday of the Church, the day the Church began. It is the day when the followers of Jesus were given the gift of the Spirit's power. And having the power of God's Spirit, they were able to go out and start to change the world.

Pentecost was not the day when the disciples were first given God's Spirit. On Easter Sunday, in the evening, as we read in the gospel, Jesus met with them and breathed on them, breathed his resurrection breath of life and told them to "Receive the Holy Spirit" Or "Receive the Holy Breath" the word can be used for either thing. The Spirit of God is God's breath and gives life in the same way that breath gives life to our bodies. So Jesus gave his breath and life and Spirit to his disciples as soon as he was risen from death, as soon as it was in his power to give it.

But until Pentecost, seven weeks later, the disciples knew that they had God's Spirit but they didn't know how to be empowered and directed by the Spirit. It was a bit like knowing that you have musical ability and a great desire to make music, but not knowing quite how to begin.

They knew that there was something which they were to do. When Jesus breathed on them, it was with the words "As the Father sent me, so I send you." There was to be a definite continuation of Jesus work on earth. But what was that work, and how were they to begin?

At the beginning of the book of Acts, where we read about Jesus' ascension to heaven, we can see that right up until the time that he left them, his disciples were still expecting him "to restore the kingdom to Israel." They were looking for a political restoration of past glories. And Jesus, even as he left them, told them no, he wasn't about that kind of power. "But, he said "You will have power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," or is unleashed in you, "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." The power was to be unleashed in them, but it would not be political or worldly power, so what would it be about?

I expect in these weeks of wonder, of sometimes meeting with Jesus, of seeing him ascend into heaven, the disciples were – perhaps almost subconsciously – assimilating the idea that it was about Jesus. It wasn't about Israel and the nation's position in the world. That time was past. Now what their mission was about, their purpose in life, was about Jesus. It was about God sending his Son, about a new chapter in history – the history of the Jews, yes, but also the history of the world.

The message was to believe in Jesus as God's Son – which was shown by his life and by his rising from death. The message was about following his teaching, which would mean living in a radically different way, and re-shaping whole societies to demonstrate that might is not always right, that failure is not always bad, that love is the most important thing in the world.

But how to begin? How to tell this message? How to find the right time and the courage?

They prayed (Acts 1:14). That was what they did. They prayed.

Sometimes Pentecost is called the birthday of the Church, but I would say that the church was born when the disciples and other believers, including Jesus' mother and other women, formed the habit of praying together.

Without prayer the best intentioned of us can get it wrong. Without prayer we forget to rely on God and start to rely on our own wisdom. Without prayer the Church is little more than a social gathering – helpful to others sometimes – but existing to serve itself. Prayer is the most important thing that we do when we come together week by week. The prayer meeting which runs for a scant 30 minutes on a Monday is the most important half hour in my week, and I think, in the life of the church. It would be wonderful if more of us were present, and we could share together as we open our hearts before God. A Church that does not pray is not a church, and any group that prays to God in Jesus is a Church, no matter how they think of themselves.

So they prayed, and they waited. Waited to see how God would answer their prayers, waited to discover what their mission would look like. It wasn't so long to wait – ten days if the traditional calculation of the Ascension day is correct. We know when the Day of Pentecost was, because that was a set day, a great Jewish feast day. Pentecost was the Greek name for it, but the Jews called it the feast of harvest or the feast of weeks – it was the celebration of the first weeks of the harvest season and came seven weeks after the feast of the First Fruits, at the very beginning of the barley harvest. (Barley was the first crop to ripen.)

They waited and they prayed for those ten days or so, but they didn't know it would just be ten days, and for some -Peter maybe, or Thomas maybe – these days may have seemed very long. But the day of Pentecost came, and while they were gathered together, in a spirit of prayer, they heard something like a violent wind and they saw what looked like flames and the joy of God filled them, so that they could not keep quiet. And as they gave tongue they realised that they were speaking in different languages.

This was the beginning. This was what, if they had but known it, they were waiting for. These were people who had been keeping a low profile, but not anymore. They knew that the time had come to take the risk and get out there with the message. And so they went out into the streets and began speaking about God's deeds of power in Jesus.

Pentecost was not when the church was born, but it was when the church grew up and got active. And once it began, it never stopped. The life of this congregation stands in direct line of succession from the activities of the disciples on the day of Pentecost, when they took the good news out from the four walls behind which they had been hiding and let it loose in the world.

It began with preaching the world – there never would be an opportunity like that given by the heterogeneous collection of Jews and God-fearers in Jerusalem for the feast. The first thing to do was to tell them, and with the Spirit's gifting and impetus, the disciples did that. Not everyone was impressed, of course, the mockery which they had been hiding from and fearing did come, and it wasn't long before sharper attacks than verbal mockery came their way. But three thousand people became believers that day. And once that had happened, a beginning had been made that could never be undone. God's Spirit gave the disciples the ability to be evangelists. That is the ability to tell the good news in a way that people could hear it and could respond to it. We still need God's Spirit to raise up evangelists in our land. I have been ploughing my way through the thick volume of reports which have been prepared in advance of the General Assembly which begins on Saturday, and there I have found an impassioned plea to the Church to find ways of acknowledging and encouraging those who have the gift of evangelism.

Evangelism was just the beginning, though never a beginning that can be left behind. As you read on through the book of Acts you can find God' Spirit leading the disciples, the original disciples and the many new ones, into different Christ-like areas of service and witness. We find them providing for the poor and the hungry, healing the sick and opening the Kingdom of God to all believers, not just those who matched up racially or in other ways.

By God's Spirit, the Church needs to do these things still and to do them together. There are things which we can do as individuals, in showing love and care and in telling about Jesus and the love of God. Especially when we come to people where they live, helping them in their homes or offering hospitality, this is often best done on an individual basis. But there are some things which we do best as a congregation – holding special services, showing our presence in the community at various events, teaming up to make sure that none of those who are vulnerable are forgotten in the care we can offer.

And then there are Christ-like, Spirit-inspired things which we can do better across the denomination or across denominations in an area: the wonderful work of the Church of Scotland's Crossreach agency, caring for elderly, confused, addicted, abused and others all over Scotland could not be done so well by just one or two alone. Or the fantastic work of Christian Aid in caring for people affected by war and disaster, in working with people in under-developed countries to alleviate long-term poverty, and in campaigning with governments to legislate in line with God's bias for the poor, not in line with what suits the rich (which is sometimes us) best. Alone none of us could do what that and other Christian agencies manage to do, but God's Spirit calls us to work together.

It was not just one of the disciples (including the women) who were given the power to go out and get started, but all of them. It was the witness of all of them which so impressed – that all the groups in Jerusalem were catered for at once was the talking point, the thing which encouraged people to listen. God's Spirit, God's breath and life, is given to all Christ's followers and calls us to work together to spread God's Kingdom on earth.

Over the centuries since that first day of Pentecost, the Church has not always addressed the needs of the world in the same ways. How we fulfil Christ's mission will vary from place to place and from era to era, as society changes. But people still have

a need to hear the good news, to taste the good news, to be made whole by the good news, to be welcomed into the good news. This Pentecost we pray that God would continue to empower and prod this church forward in these area, here and across the globe. Amen

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