

Pentecost Themes

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[0 : 00] When my children were very small, they're both grown-up children now, we used to go along to the Pembroke coast, along that beautiful peninsula, right to the end of that lovely little cathedral city of St. David's.

And because when the children were small, we didn't have a lot of money, and we had a little caravan, and we used to take it to this site every year where you could just kind of walk down onto the beach.

And there were those magnificent views from the top, but the downside of it was the wind. Well, my goodness, when that wind came off the sea and you could feel it lift the caravan.

That's quite frightening in the middle of the night to feel the caravan lift and drop, you know, because there's a gale going on. And an enormous power that, you know, I remember getting up one morning, and every caravan awning had been ripped off was two fields away.

Huge power in the wind. It's that sense of power that we sometimes forget when we think about winds.

[1 : 04] Many of you will remember the great gale we had in 1987, you know, the one that came without warning. And it tore the roof off our garage, and it deposited in the allotments.

You know, that huge sense of power, so powerful that that wind, that storm, ripped the wind meter, the anemometer, off the top of Beachy Head.

You know, you're talking about wind that bends metal and uproots things. That's the kind of imagery that we're talking about when we talk about the wind at Pentecost.

It's a mighty wind that Luke talks about. And, you know, I make no apology for using again that reading that we heard on Pentecost Sunday, because we're in Pentecost season.

Now, I'm old enough that when I started my ministry, we would have counted the Sundays from Trinity. You know, so how many am I from Trinity? How many from Pentecost? Sometimes we now call it ordinary season, but we know, don't we, there's no ordinary Sunday with God.

[2 : 09] Every Sunday with God is an extraordinary Sunday. But here we are in this Pentecost season, thinking about the great power that God gives in the life of the church.

And when Luke talks about the experience being not just like wind, but a mighty wind, he's not just saying it was a bit breezy, or it felt a bit drafty.

It's something that will pick you up and shake you about, that great sense of the wind that goes right through you. So powerful it is.

Now, I have to make a confession that I'm awful about holidays. I always leave it to the last moment. And my wife says to me, have you done anything about the holidays this year? And I never have, and it gets later and later.

And one year, I was so bad that I just had to go into the travel agents and said, tell me where I can go. Just book me anywhere. And so she said to me, Fuerteventura.

[3 : 14] And I thought, where? Now, Fuerteventura is an island in the Canaries. And I can tell you three things about Fuerteventura. It's very, very hot, because the wind comes straight off the Sahara across Fuerteventura.

Secondly, it's very rugged. It's where they tested the Moon Rover vehicles before they sent them into space. And the third fact, and this is always going to serve you good in the quiz, is that nobody quite knows what the name means.

Because if you speak a little bit of Spanish, you'll know that Fuerteventura can either mean a mighty wind, because it's so windy, but it also in Spanish means a great adventure.

Fuerteventura, a great expedition, great adventure. And it just struck me how appropriate, and particularly this morning when we were talking, in fact, about the great adventure of walking with

God in this season, that this was such a powerful metaphor for what we so easily underplay and gloss over.

So what was it that the disciples of Jesus were trying to get across when they spoke about the experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit like wind and like fire?

[4 : 35] Because if you look at the Bible, they're not very common images. Certainly not common images for the Holy Spirit. More common in the New Testament are those symbols of the dove, that gentle, warm-winged creature whom we associate with the baptism of Jesus, as we shared at the baptism this morning.

The point at which Jesus is affirmed in his walk with God, in his ministry, in his Messiahship. Just as now, at Pentecost, the apostles are affirmed and empowered to be the new missionary community of the church.

But this imagery is something different, something much closer to images that we find in the Old Testament. A fire and wind, something very powerful.

Now, if you imagine what it would have been like in those days to live in a city like Jerusalem. A very dry city, where the houses would be very close together.

I mean, if you go to somewhere like Morocco or somewhere, and you walk through the narrow alleyways, and the houses are made of what's called adobe. And it's dried earth mixed with sticks and on a timber frame.

[5 : 53] Now, you imagine what happens if you have a fire somewhere like that. That's just terrifying. And when the wind comes and it fans the flames and it draws them through those narrow alleyways, that would have been a terrifying experience for people.

It's more like out-of-control bushfire than a cozy fireside on a winter's night. But, you know, often, so often, we like to keep those biblical images under control.

So that we control them, when the reality is they actually control us. We don't have the power over them. They have the power over us.

Now, one of the problems today, of course, when you're talking about power, is the fact that when we use that word, almost always today, we use it in a pejorative sense.

Unless you're talking about the power of washing power or detergent. When people talk about power, they're often talking about something negative, the abuse of power.

[7 : 04] And how power can so easily become a corrupting influence in the lives of people. You remember that phrase of Lord Acton's, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

When it's used in a positive sense, so often the word we use today, rather than power, is the word empowerment. That's a good example how language changes when we use it.

So at Pentecost, the disciples are empowered by God in the giving of the Holy Spirit. Because empowerment is about letting go of power and giving it to someone else.

So if I empower you, I let go of the power that I hold and I say, it's yours. You take it on. You use it. You be used by it.

Empowerment is about letting go of power to someone else and trusting them with it. It's about recognizing worth and value and potential in people.

[8 : 10] Empowerment is about making people responsible for the world in which they live. And the relationships in which they're involved. That's what the Magnificat talks about.

When it talks about God lifting up the humble and the meek. It's talking about how God empowers the poor. Empowers the meek. Empowers the weak.

Empowerment is about giving the vulnerable and the powerless what they need to change their lives and the lives of others. Now it seems to me that's exactly what the Pentecost story and the Pentecost experience does.

It takes a group of frightened followers and it turns them into leaders. It takes people who were bewildered and disorientated.

And we know that because the New Testament tells us that they were hiding themselves away in those early days before the Pentecost experience. And it gives them a sense of direction and a sense of purpose.

[9 : 18] And it takes people who have no voice and it gives them the voice to speak out. The story of Pentecost is a story that breaks through our security and what is all too often our complacency.

And remember that it's a story that takes place in one of the three great festivals of the Jewish year. when Jewish law required the attendance of every male adult Jew at the temple.

So this isn't something that happens on a quiet weekend in November. This happens on a bank holiday when the city would have been full of people from all over the known world.

You did really well wherever you are with those names. You know, lists of names like that are a real pain to get right. People from all over the known world.

When I lived in Cumbria, where Jesus' great commission is to go to the people who are at the very ends of the earth. I said in the Roman world that meant you in Cumbria. That's where the empire ended.

[10:28] That's what it meant. You know, Jesus is speaking entirely to you at that point. But if the church was going to get maximum exposure, then this was the time for people to come out and to speak out.

And come out and speak out they did because into the marketplace came the followers of Jesus. Those same men who in the New Testament, we're told, have been hiding.

Hiding themselves away. And they come out, not when there's no one around to hear them, when it's quiet, but into a city full of people.

Full of the followers of Judaism from all over the known world. And with a confident certainty, a confident certainty, they began to speak about Jesus, the person who had, for the past three years, lived with them and walked with them and changed them.

And by changing them, had about changed the world by his life, his death, and his coming back to life. His name, they said, was Jesus who was called the Christ. And they had known him as a man, as a great preacher and teacher.

[11:42] And now they spoke of him also as God. God taking on human form and living among his people. Pointing them by his teaching and his life to the kingdom of God.

And as they spoke, people were amazed to hear the story of how he had healed the sick and raised the dead to life. How he promised that those who were downtrodden and oppressed would be set free.

about how those who were least in this world would have a special place in God's coming kingdom. And all this, they said, all this, because although now unseen, God was still with them through his spirit.

A spirit who had come to them in tongues of fire and the sound of a mighty wind. And he'd made them the recipients of God's promised gift.

And from that very moment, that very moment, those ordinary people, ordinary like you and me, had become extraordinary because they had been called by God.

[12:54] And one of the phrases that my students always used to hear me talk when I was teaching in theological education was about the extraordinary ordinariness of the people of God.

That's a great phrase. They had been called into a missionary community with a message so important, so powerful, that it could not be contained.

These were people who had been empowered. And the effect was dramatic enough to stop people in the street.

Whether it was out of curiosity or out of interest, people stopped what they were doing and they listened and the more they listened and the more they were drawn into what was being said.

St. Luke says that they were amazed. Now the Greek word means staggered. They were staggered by what they heard.

[13:53] Both by the message and the sheer audacity and boldness of those who had the courage to stand up in the marketplace and speak as they did. So much so that some people thought it was Dutch courage.

They said they must have been drinking. But they hadn't. Here was something much more powerful. It was the courage of conviction.

The courage of conviction. Here were people who had been empowered and who because of that had been set free. Free from themselves.

Free from their anxieties. Free from their timidity. And above all free from their silence. There was a great German theologian called Karl Barth.

Do you remember doing Karl Barth when you were in college? Great. Glad you remember him. But when he was talking about the empowerment of the Spirit he says this. It is to have inner ears for the word of Christ.

[14:53] To be thankful for his work and at the same time to become responsible for the message about him. It's to take confidence in people for Christ's sake.

And he says that's the freedom we obtain when Christ breathes on us and when he sends us the Holy Spirit. He makes us responsible for the world. That's empowerment.

So what happens at Pentecost not just you know that one day but life every day after that. What happens at Pentecost is that men and women you and I become irresistibly involved in the work of Christ so that what began as a mighty wind becomes the great adventure.

I wonder how often we say that to ourselves in the life of the church. That we're involved in this great adventure. And it's not just for a select few and that's something that Peter makes clear in his Pentecost sermon.

He says this promise is for you and for your children and for all those who are still far off. it was for sorry tell me her name again who was baptized.

[16:13] Olivia. It's God's promise to Olivia. Today she begins the great adventure of the walk with God. It doesn't mean that God hasn't loved her from the moment she was conceived in her mum's womb he has he's known her and loved her but today he draws her into that great adventure of the life of faith.

it's wrong to think of the Holy Spirit as being something that's just for a few within the life of the church. It's about all of us being drawn into the work that God has for us to do because what the Holy Spirit does is to make real in the life of the church the saving work of Christ and what that does is to set people free to be disciples in community and in mission.

That's who we are. We are a missionary people. The word missionary literally means a sent people. Isn't it interesting how at the beginning of the gospels we hear all the come words.

Jesus says come and follow me come and see. The end of the gospels it's flipped. Jesus says go. Now it's your turn to get out there.

There's a wonderful phrase that the orthodox use about life they call it the liturgy after the liturgy. It's what you do when the service has ended and you go out into the world.

[17:49] Out into the marketplace. Out into the city. And whether you're an apostle or a sixth former or a church member or a student that can be as frightening as a mighty wind and as exciting as a great adventure.

And for all of us there will come the time when we can't leave it to others when God calls us to speak that word in season maybe to a family member maybe to a friend maybe to a stranger but God will call us to be apostles and to speak those Pentecost words those words of God that set people free.

But you know that is also the time that we will become most acutely aware that we are not alone and we're not doing that in our own power but in the transforming power of God who is at work in us like wind and like fire making us new people giving us a boldness that we never knew never expected that we might have.

So may we in this season of Pentecost experience both the terror and the joy of that new relationship with God who calls and empowers us whose coming is like a consuming fire and a devastating wind that will change us forever so that life life in all its fullness becomes an amazing adventure.

Thanks be to God for his gift to us. And let's just hear those words that Paul speaks in Romans.

[19:51] May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace as you trust in him that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.