

Pentecost

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[0 : 0 0] Great. Do please, if you've got a Bible, turn with me to Acts chapter 2, those famous words, which I'm sure many of you know very well indeed. And then let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, please would you open our eyes once again, that we might behold wonderful things in your words. And by your precious Holy Spirit, please would you melt our hearts and mould our wills, that we might live in humble obedience to all that we read. And in the precious name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Morning everyone, I have the dubious honour of being on General Synod.

It is a dubious honour, but there's one thing I like about it, it means that at least once or twice a year I get to go and spend a week in London. And I love it because I get to stay in the Premier Inn in Westminster. And I love the Premier Inn. I'm not being sponsored, I promise you, and yes, I'm a bit of a sado. But the reason is very simple. They are very clear about their purpose.

Sleep easy is their tagline. They want you to sleep easy. And what I really like is their confidence is in their commitment and their work to make that happen. They make a good night guarantee that if you don't have a great night's sleep, they will give you your money back. So all insomniacs, go and stay in the Premier Inn. But I love it because there's a company that knows what its purpose is, and it puts its money where its mouth is. And it begs the question on Pentecost Sunday, often described as the birthday of the church about what is our purpose. Why is Christ's church here in Clevedon? And how confident are you that you're getting it right? Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, addressed the session of General Centre five years ago and spoke clearly about what he thought the main purpose of the church was. And this is what he said. For too long, the ministry of evangelism in the church has been viewed as an app on the system. I don't know what kind of apps you have on your mobile device. But some of you will know that apps are simply add-ons, optional extras, suited to those with particular interests and activities. As I said, for many, it seems that evangelism is just such an app, simply to be used for those who are gifted, who don't mind being out of their comfort zones, who are happy talking about faith with strangers, and have a clever way of explaining the mysteries of God's love. But evangelism and witness are not an app. They are the operating system itself. All Christians are witnesses of the love of

Jesus Christ. The Spirit comes to us precisely for this task. And as witnesses of Jesus, we then become witnesses to Jesus, relaying what we have experienced and what we have known to others.

[3 : 1 7] I remember a conversation I had many years ago before I was ordained with a vicar of a church that had grown enormously. And he said to me this, no church should ever have an outreach or mission team.

I was really shocked. And he explained, you see, evangelism, outreach, mission, whatever word you want to call it, bearing witness to Jesus, must permeate every part of church life. It's the reason we do what we do.

Our greatest calling in life is to simply bear witness to Jesus and make him known to others. Therefore, he said it should be on the agenda of every single team in the church. If you're the pastoral team, the worship team, the worship team, the buildings team, the discipleship team, the finance team, number one on your agenda should be, how is this making Jesus known?

You see, if a church was a stick of rock, and I guess there must be Clevedon sticks of rock, aren't there? If I went down to the shops, we've Clevedon put all the way through the middle.

What he's saying is this, is that if there was a Christchurch Clevedon stick of rock, what would be the words that went right the way through that no matter where you cut it, you would find them?

[4 : 41] What Welby is saying, and which I think our passage is telling us, is this, is that witness, making Jesus known, should be the words that go from start to finish.

Wherever you cut this church, what will people say about it? It is a place where they want Jesus to be known. That's why, as a diocese, we've got the tagline, living and telling the story of Jesus.

In fact, we used to have some sticks of rock that had that going through. And yes, it's cheesy, but it's absolutely right. It ought to be right that wherever you cut this diocese, whatever meetings, boy, have I sat in some meetings over the last seven years.

But what should be at the heart of every meeting is living and telling the story of Jesus. That is why we're here. And the reason I say all of this is because that, I believe, is what Pentecost Sunday is all about.

Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, is not the Holy Spirit coming just to make us feel good, or to give us a certain feeling or a certain experience. And then we just go home and carry on, as we did on Sunday.

[5 : 55] Sorry, go on Monday and do what we do every Monday or Tuesday. Now, the central feature of that day of Pentecost are people declaring the praises of God, bearing witness to God's goodness.

That is why the Holy Spirit comes. I'd love it if you'd have got your balloon, as it were. And I know you were leaking it, but if you'd have just let it go, and it whizzed around the room for a while.

In one sense, that is why we come. Not to stand still, but to get out and get on with that which Jesus has called us to. You see, the occasion of Pentecost shows us that bearing witness to Jesus is the heart of the Holy Spirit's work.

You know, the day of Pentecost was 50 days after Passover, hence Pentecost. It was the best attended of the great festivals because travelling conditions were at their best.

There was never a more cosmopolitan gathering in Jerusalem than there was for that Pentecost celebration. Literally, the whole world was there. And if you remember in Acts chapter 1, the disciples are told, God, you're going to be my witness in all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

[7 : 09] You are going to bear witness to me to the ends of the earth. And here it is amazingly, in chapter 2, the ends of the earth come to Jerusalem and begin to hear this wonderful testimony of what Jesus has done in people's lives.

In one sense, this is just the first fruits. This is the beginning. This is the kind of visual illustration of what their whole lives is about. Now, I brought the whole world to you on day one.

Now, spend the rest of the time going out to the whole world and taking Jesus to them. And the day of Pentecost was actually a harvest festival.

It was known as the Feast of First Fruits. And it was emphasised by a special offering of two baked loaves made from freshly gathered wheat. And you'll find in Leviticus 23, they're called first fruits to the Lord.

Do you see the symbolism of the day of Pentecost? That those 120 who were declaring the praises of God across the world, and then we read in chapter 2, 3,000 are converted.

[8 : 12] They are just the first fruits of an even greater harvest. Jesus in Matthew 9 said, Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest fields. It's funny, there's a lot of talk, isn't there, about the number of people going to churches and the sense of decline. Do you think the problem is there aren't many people out there who don't know Jesus who could become believers?

No. Where's the problem? It's the number of harvesters. And Jesus has said, It will always be the case where there's never enough harvesters for the size of harvest.

Whereas I think, we think, no one really wants to know Jesus. There's tons of us sitting around here, but no one out there wants to know. That's not true. Jesus says there is a harvest field swaying out there, absolutely everywhere.

The minute you walk out of this church this morning, there are people desperate to hear the news of Jesus. They may not think so, that wonderful testimony. That young lad didn't have a clue that Jesus would be the thing, the one who would turn his life around.

[9 : 24] He's not coming asking because he didn't know. But they do. I've just walked past a bowling green. I just thought, God, what a lovely thing to do on a Sunday morning. Bowling away, bowling away.

Those people on that bowling green need to know Jesus Christ. They don't know it yet. But that's where the harvest field is swaying. How will it change the way you look at where you work?

Or where you spend the day? Or your Pilates class? If you just see it as a harvest field. I'm not telling you to go and be one of those really weird Christians that stands up in the middle of your Pilates class and tells everyone to stop because the Lord is going to speak to them.

I'm not saying that at all. But it changes it when you walk in and realise this is the harvest field that God has placed me in. Maybe a tennis club.

I don't know where you hang out. But, Lord, this is the harvest field you've placed me in. What might you want me to do here? How might you, by your Holy Spirit, empower me to bear witness to you in this place, with this people right now?

[10 : 31] If the occasion of Pentecost tells us that bearing witness to Jesus is the heart of our purpose, then the events of Pentecost show that too.

The first thing we encounter is that wind. Do you remember it starts as a breeze that starts to move across the room as they're praying. And then it becomes more like a violent wind.

And it becomes almost like a wild tornado. I imagine that their robes are flapping absolutely everywhere. The crockery is flying off the shelves. It's complete chaos in that room because the wind is so strong.

Many of you who are far more scholarly than I will know that the Hebrew word for wind and the Greek word for wind are also the same word that the Bible uses for Holy Spirit. And it immediately brings to mind that powerful image.

Do you remember from Ezekiel? If any of you know Ezekiel. Ezekiel was taken to a valley of dry bones. And the image is really sad. It's a picture of God's people spiritually dead.

[11 : 36] They've neglected God. They've lived a religious life, yes. But they've lost sight actually in that religious life of the God who saved them and who loved them.

And we're told that they are dead, spiritually dead. They're like dry bones. But then Ezekiel uses that word, the spirit word, the wind word, to describe a wind that begins to move across that valley as he spoke words that God gave to him.

Ezekiel says this, What an image that must have been.

Can you imagine it? Bones beginning to clatter. It would be quite a gory scene as sinews and muscles and flesh begin to form around the bones. And the Holy Spirit breathes life into those dead people and creates a mighty army.

Pentecost is the moment when God raises up his army. Now army is a difficult word sometimes used, get too militaristic about it.

[12 : 53] But it is the moment when God raises up a spirit-filled, joy-filled people. Not because they're great people in themselves. No, because they were dead. Without the Holy Spirit, we are dead.

We are just clattering bones lying on the ground. But by his grace, Jesus steps into our lives. And by his Holy Spirit, he revives us.

And he's made us into a powerful group of people. Now we may not feel like it. I often don't feel like it. When I read the newspapers, it makes me feel even less powerful.

Because what the newspapers tell me is that we are a weak, stupid bunch of people who turn up to church. And we're all a bit irrelevant these days. And of course, sometimes we give people a good reason to think we're irrelevant.

Because we sometimes are pretty dried up. Pretty unexcited. We don't look like we've been raised up to be this excited, spirit-filled group of people.

[13 : 57] And I'm looking around the room and some of you don't look massively thrilled that you are filled with the Spirit. So we're not a great advertisement. So I'm not asking you to go and put on that kind of cheesy Christian smile.

But you know what I mean. We can feel, oh, this feels hard work being a witness to Jesus. But the Spirit turns us into a powerful army of people who now can go out there.

A group of people where the life of God is pulsing through our veins. We're not doing it as limp, lifeless people on our own. We're doing it because the Spirit of God inhabits us.

And then there's that image of fire. And in Jewish history, fire was symbolic of the very presence of God himself. Do you remember the burning bush? As Moses encounters the presence of the living God and speaks with him.

Do you remember the fiery pillar that led the people of Israel through the deserts? And perhaps supremely, you remember the events that happened as the people of God gathered at Mount Sinai. We're told that at Mount Sinai it was covered in smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

[15 : 08] Can you imagine being there at Sinai? What it was like for Moses to go up there with the fire of God's presence coming down. Well, guess what?

Pentecost was the moment when they, it was like an anniversary of that moment when God came and met his people on Mount Sinai. That's what they'd have thought on Pentecost.

Wow. Here is the presence of God, just as he did in Moses' day, coming down in our day. And he's not just coming down on the mountain. He's coming down on each individual as each individual has that flame appearing on their heads.

What it's saying is this, is that God is now present in his people. Do you know what a bizarre thought that, I don't know how many of you work, or maybe you go to a WI or, as I say, a Pilates class.

I wonder how many people in that room realise that God walks into that room the moment you walk into that room. That's weird, isn't it? But the moment you walk into that room, they begin to encounter the living God by his Holy Spirit.

[16 : 21] Now that suddenly changes how you do your down dog or whatever it is in your Pilates class, doesn't it? Paul goes on to describe how we are the aroma of Christ.

Do you remember, I'm old enough to remember the Bisto ads. Do you remember the Bisto ads? The, ah, Bisto. As they kind of catch the smell. What do people smell?

I was about to say, what do people smell on you when you go to your Pilates class? But you know what I mean. What is the aroma you give off? Is it the aroma of God's presence and God's spirit?

When you leave the room, do people go, wow. This has been better for that person being here. I'm so glad you're around. It's interesting today that Jürgen Klopp is leaving Liverpool.

And everyone speaks so highly of him. I'm sure it's because he's a great manager, but he's also a Christian. There's something that says to me, I wonder if there isn't something of the aroma of Christ that people have sniffed around Jürgen Klopp.

[17 : 25] I don't know. How do the words that we say and the actions? That's what I love about that testimony. It's not that suddenly you have to be brilliant at going and standing on the street corner.

Or having conversations that feel ridiculously unnatural. But it is that when faced with a difficult situation, you say, let's bring Jesus to the centre of this situation.

Let's pray. Let's have faith. Let's trust. That's what the Holy Spirit allows us to do. To believe that Jesus can be absolutely present at the heart of the normal things and the difficult things that we're facing day in, day out.

And then finally there are those utterances. As everyone in the crowd is enabled to speak the words and the deeds of God in a language that everybody else in the crowd can hear.

You see, up to now, proclaiming God's word has been a specialist task. It was the prophets. Certain particular people at certain particular times, the Holy Spirit came on them and enabled them to speak.

[18 : 32] But Peter, in that explanation, as he tries to explain all these extraordinary things that are happening, says this. He says, the Holy Spirit has come so that everyone can have a voice to speak of the goodness of God.

No matter what your gender, no matter what age, no matter what your standing in life. I'm pouring out my spirits on every single one. People that didn't used to have a voice. You're young women.

Young women weren't listening to you. Oh no, now they speak the word of God. You're old women. Yeah, people didn't listen to them either. Oh, but now they're the ones who are going to speak the word of God.

People will hear of the good news of Christ through them. Why? Verse 21. So that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Do you see? Do you see? The whole point of Pentecost is that people hear the voice of God. They hear the good news of Jesus. And they respond and find salvation.

[19 : 36] And it happens through you and through me. I'm afraid, my friends, we are plan A and there is no plan B. Clive is about to leave.

I'm about to leave. I find that churches get a bit jumpy when vicars leave. They think, ooh, what's going to happen now? My friends, you've got the Holy Spirit. You don't need Clive.

Is that true, Clive? The head of the church has gone nowhere. Jesus is still the head of his church.

God is still here, present. Now, of course, you will miss Clive. And of course, it will be a different church going forward. But it won't collapse because Clive goes, because the Holy Spirit is here.

Do you believe that? Nothing needs to change. You've got everything you need to be the church God has called you to be. No matter who's the vicar, no matter who's the archdeacon, it doesn't matter.

[20 : 40] It's rather humbling for us to discover that. But it's true. Amen.