

Pentecost: The church goes public

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

! O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.! Today is Pentecost Sunday.

It is the day in the Christian year when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Church, as the disciples gathered in Jerusalem in the days after the Easter events of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

We may feel that Pentecost is not really our thing as Presbyterians. We are a practical people. I like Harvest Festival when we can bring cans of soup to church.

But I'm more wary of Pentecost with its tongues of fire in church. As an elder said to a visitor to the Kirk who kept interrupting the sermon with, Praise the Lord!

[1 : 14] We don't praise the Lord here. But what exactly happened at Pentecost? And why does it matter for us in the Church of Scotland today?

What happened and why it matters can be summed up in just 12 words. In Acts chapter 2 verse 8 we read, We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues.

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own languages. When we grasp the significance of these 12 words, we grasp what Pentecost means for us.

Our son studied Japanese at university. He had a summer job in Tesco working at the checkout desk. One day a Japanese couple queued up at his till with their groceries.

As they paid for them, my son said in fluent Japanese, How are you enjoying your visit to our city? Instead of replying, these Japanese tourists jumped out of their skin and let out a shout, astonished that someone working at a checkout desk spoke their own language.

[2 : 40] The amazement of these Japanese tourists was as nothing compared with the bewilderment of those who heard the disciples speaking to them on the day of Pentecost.

Jews from all around the Middle Eastern world had gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. What astonished the crowds gathered in Jerusalem was that they heard the disciples speaking to them in their own native languages.

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues. I want to unpack just this one sentence because if we understand its meaning, we understand not only what happened to the first disciples at Pentecost, we also see why Pentecost matters for the life of our church today.

All this in one sentence. First, the bewildered crowd says, we hear them.

Them. Who are they? Surely this is not the same group of Jesus' followers who had abandoned him on his arrest and gone into hiding.

[3 : 59] Surely their spokesman on the day of Pentecost is not the same Peter who followed the arrested Jesus at a distance. And when confronted by a servant, girl said, woman, I do not know him.

But yes, these are the same cowardly disciples and this is the same cowardly Peter. When the crowd on the day of Pentecost say, we hear them, we need to remember who they are.

Judas was not the only disciple to betray Jesus. They all did. Above all, Peter. And yet, and yet, they are utterly different now.

No longer hiding behind closed doors, no longer afraid to declare their association with this Jesus. Instead, they're out on the streets of Jerusalem, boldly speaking to their fellow Jews who had gathered in this holy city from around the known world, telling them about this Jesus in public.

Pentecost is when the church goes public. Taking its message of the coming of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ out of our own gatherings and out into the crowds of the wider world.

[5 : 29] But if we're honest, we're often so fearful of going public with our faith in Scotland today. The media tell us we are a declining and irrelevant minority in the church of Scotland.

The prevailing values of our culture so often seem at odds with the values of the gospel. But doesn't this all sound familiar? Our situation sounds very much like that of the disciples on the day of Pentecost.

They were a fearful group of followers of Jesus hiding from the public. Yet whatever happened at Pentecost transformed them into a bold band of witnesses to their risen Lord going public with this good news.

It's as if the walls of the room they were hiding in suddenly dissolved and they found themselves catapulted out into the streets of Jerusalem.

Are we ready in Craig Lockhart to be catapulted by the Holy Spirit out into our community and city to tell the same good news of our risen Lord?

[6 : 47] And so second we must ask what exactly happened on the day of Pentecost to make these fearful disciples hiding in that room go public?

Again our little sentence tells us how we hear them declaring the wonders of God.

There are typically two ways in which a group of people turn their lives around. Every football fan is familiar with the first way. It's called the dressing room talk from the manager.

You can picture the scene. The team are 3-0 down at half time. In popular parlance they're playing mince. And so a good manager tries to motivate his team to play better in the second half.

Colourful language is not unknown. There is now a whole industry of inspirational speakers whose job it is to motivate the sports team the office staff the sales force to up their game.

[7 : 56] But there is a second way in which a group of people have their lives turned around. They go through an experience so profound so out of the ordinary that their lives are never the same again.

This is what happened to the disciples on the day of Pentecost. This was not a day to bring in an inspirational speaker. There was no one gathered with them on the day of Pentecost who could have given them a team talk least of all Peter.

There was no Alex Ferguson or even a Billy Graham. They had all betrayed their Lord and run away. No. What happened on the day of Pentecost to turn this team of turncoats around was an experience so powerful so beyond their control that it changed their lives forever.

Luke in that second chapter of Acts tells us the experience that caused the disciples to lose their fear and to go public with their faith.

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

[9 : 25] This is Luke's dramatic account of what happened when the disciples gathered in one place on the day of Pentecost. Its biblical imagery of wind and fire has caught the imagination of artists down through the centuries.

Here on our screen we see how the great artist El Greco portrayed the scene with tongues of fire above each disciple's head symbolizing the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit over each and every one of them.

It is so easy to think that these are the wonders of God spoken of by the crowds. The signs and wonders of a mighty wind and tongues of fire from heaven.

But I want to suggest to you that these are not the wonders of God here. They only point to the wonders of God. What we are witnessing in this scene is none other than Jesus keeping his promise to the disciples before his ascension to heaven.

And what is Christ's promise? After his resurrection as they met over a meal the risen Christ says to his disciples do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift the Father promised which you have heard me speak about for John baptized with water but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

[11 : 05] What are the wonders of God? They are not the tongues of fire they are the promises of God. On the day of Pentecost the risen Christ keeps his promise to his faithless disciples.

This Jesus pours out on the disciples the same Holy Spirit that he himself received at his baptism for sinners in the Jordan River. The presence and power of God to equip them for their mission just as the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus of Nazareth for his unique mission.

This is the real drama of the day of Pentecost. The stark contrast between disciples like Peter with their failed promise to follow Jesus come what may and the ascended Christ who delivered the Father's promised gift.

the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. And so we read all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

This is what turned the disciples around. Not a pep talk but the sense of the presence of God again in their lives just as they had when they walked with Jesus around Galilee.

[12:38] Too often in the history of the Christian church we've understood the wonders of God to be the outward appearances of God at work in the world. Whether it is tongues of fire or day I say it in the presence of a distinguished representative of the Church of Scotland statistics of church numbers.

The day of Pentecost reminds us of what are the true and lasting wonders of God. The promises God keeps and the Spirit God sends.

This is the recurring theme of the scriptures of the Old Testament. God keeps God's promises. This is the recurring theme of Jesus' teaching.

His Father keeps his promises. promises. This is exactly what the crowds heard from Peter on the day of Pentecost as he preached to them with boldness and confidence as a now forgiven and spirit filled follower of Jesus.

Some of the crowds thought the disciples were drunk as they saw this energized group almost dancing among them in their excitement to share what God had done in their midst.

[13:56] No, we're not drunk, says Peter. We're filled with the spirit. And how does Peter seek to persuade his fellow Jews in the crowd that the disciples are truly filled with the Holy Spirit?

Not by speaking about the tongues of fire or the sound of a mighty rushing wind. These are not the wonders of God that Peter points to on the day of Pentecost.

No, Peter points to the God who keeps his promises. Peter quotes from the prophet Joel. In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people.

Your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see vision. Your old men will dream dreams. What you're witnessing, says Peter to the crowd, is God keeping his promise to the prophet Joel.

Today, before your very eyes, these men and women, young and old, filled with the Holy Spirit, are prophesying to you, speaking God's word to you, the good news of this Jesus, whom you crucified, but the Father raised to his right hand as the promised Messiah.

[15:20] And, says Peter, this promise is to you as well. The crowds gathered from all the corners of the known world. He says to them, repent and be baptized, and you too will receive the promised Holy Spirit of God.

And so third, Peter's sermon at Pentecost leads us to the final words of our little sentence. we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues.

If the day of Pentecost is about the power of God's Holy Spirit to turn around a private huddle of hideaways into a public wave of witnesses to Jesus Christ, if the day of Pentecost is about the wonders of God, the promises he keeps in Jesus Christ, the day of Pentecost is also about hearing the good news of Jesus Christ in our own language.

In our own language. Since the day of Pentecost, when the crowds heard the message in their own tongues, Christians through the centuries have translated the good news of Jesus Christ into almost all the world's languages so that all may hear the gospel in words they can understand.

So what exactly happened on the day of Pentecost and why does it matter for us today? It turns out we are Pentecostals in the Church of Scotland.

[16:58] Only some of us may speak in tongues but all of us build our lives on the promises of God that Jesus made to us. This is what gives us the courage to go public in this more secular and hostile age we live in.

God has anointed us frail and often faithless as we are with his empowering Holy Spirit. God has shown us his wonders the promises he makes and the promises he keeps.

God has called us to translate the good news of Jesus Christ into every language not only the language of every nation but also the language of the scientist and the politician the poor and the vulnerable the young and the alienated the entrepreneur and the egalitarian the spiritual seeker and the religious skeptic for Jesus is good news in every language and so we can say with the crowd in

Jerusalem on that first day of Pentecost we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues praise the Lord Amen let us make our response let us