

# Knowing Me, Knowing You: Pentecost - Hearing From God - Sunday 5th June 2022

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[ 0 : 00 ] As we've just been talking about, though, as impressive, perhaps, as the Queen's platinum jubilee, no doubt, is. Today, as I said at the top, marks what we could say is a far more important day in the worldwide Christian calendar, as today is the day known as Pentecost.

And so alongside Christmas and Easter, Pentecost completes, if you like, the holy hat trick, the three main festivals of our faith.

Of holidays, or holy days, you might say, when we're called to not only remember the past, but to celebrate the ongoing significance of the events that these festivals recall.

Indeed, while Christmas recalls the events surrounding Jesus' birth, and Easter tells the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, Pentecost takes place after Jesus has ascended and returned to heaven.

And so in some ways, I guess it kind of kicks off the spiritual sequel to the Jesus story, the way in which the presence of God's Spirit becomes personal and then goes viral, if you like.

[ 1 : 09 ] Now, why Pentecost? Well, it was originally, and still is, a Jewish harvest festival, a celebration of which is the beginning of the wheat harvest in particular.

And in biblical times, people would travel from all over the Mediterranean to gather in Jerusalem to celebrate this harvest at a temple there. And as we'll explore today, though, the book of Acts in the Bible tells the story of the time when Pentecost became all about a different kind of harvest for the early followers of Jesus.

A harvest, not of wheat, but we could say of holiness, as they not only witnessed, but received the presence of God's Holy Spirit in their lives.

Indeed, here's how the writer Luke, who wrote Acts, begins to tell the story in his book in the Bible. He says, When the day of Pentecost came, the apostles were all together in one place.

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.

[ 2 : 18 ] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. And that's interesting, I think, that Luke is trying to find words here to describe what these early followers of Jesus experienced.

He says, A sound like the blowing of a violent wind. He says also, They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire resting on each of them.

I mean, how do you describe the presence of God, if not with metaphors and picture language? Talk of wind, talk of fire, they're both timeless, yet significant ways in which God's presence is revealed and understood by the writers of the Bible.

And so the Spirit, as wind, well, as Jesus himself said, blowing wherever it pleases. In this instance of Pentecost, it's described as a violent wind, untamable, unpredictable, maverick, if you like.

And then the fire, something which in the Bible is all about, not destruction, but purifying, symbolically burning away whatever holds us back in order to leave us with only what is right and holy.

[ 3 : 39 ] So wind, we might say breath, even, which fills either our lungs or like the sails on a boat, and fire, which purifies, which forms.

So filling and forming. That, it seems, is what God's presence with us and in us is all about. But then it's also interesting that as these first followers of Jesus, as it says, as all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

So the presence of God was not simply about being filled, you know, to the point of bloating, that kind of thing. No, it was also about giving out from what has been received.

As here, the Spirit, we're told, enables them to speak in other tongues. What kind of tongues? What kind of language were they speaking? Again, Luke explains as he continues his story.

He says, now they were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, the crowd came together in bewilderment because each one heard their own language being spoken.

[ 4 : 55 ] Utterly amazed, they asked, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Wish me luck on this one.

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, Egypt, and parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans, and Arabs.

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues. Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, what does this mean? Some, however, made fun of them.

And said, they've had too much wine. Then Peter, one of the disciples, he stood up with the eleven, raised his voice, and addressed the crowd. Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.

So somehow, this international crowd who'd gathered in Jerusalem all heard these Jesus followers from Galilee, a little province in the north of Israel, speaking in their own native language.

[ 6 : 07 ] Now, we don't know how this worked. You know, whether what came out of the disciples' mouths was some kind of divinely inspired translation, or whether God enabled the crowd to hear what was being said in their own language, like some dodgy 70s dubbed movie or something.

We don't know quite how it works. We're not told. But either way, what's clear, what's more important, is that God's Spirit had come in order to communicate the truth about God's love in ways that people could understand and respond to.

And if we think about it, that's totally in line with why Jesus came in the first place, coming to be God with us in a way and in a person we can relate to.

And as I said earlier, it's tough to describe what the presence of God is like without using metaphors and picture language. But in Jesus, and now through the Holy Spirit with us, God makes a priority of enabling us to understand and experience and know God in our own way.

And so I wonder for you, how would you say you encounter or are aware of God in ways that are specific for you, that you can understand?

[ 7 : 31 ] How does God speak to you in your own language, if you like, on terms you find it easiest to grasp? How do you get a sense of God's guidance in life?

How does God get your attention? It's highly unlikely, I think, to be in an audible voice, I grant you, you know, kind of by matter, pint, kind of big voice coming from heaven or whatever.

if you do hear that, do follow that word, okay? But I wonder, when and in what ways do you get that kind of, all those curveball thoughts that seem to come out of nowhere, those ones that you get that sense of conviction, you might say that gut feeling that you need to act on something, those moments of clarity that suddenly help you see something or see someone in a new light.

see, all those kind of ways in my experience are often the ways that we tend to receive God's guidance or if you like, hear God's voice speaking to us.

But what I'm also noticing, I think of late, in my own journey with God is that just as Peter and these Galilean disciples were probably the last people the crowds expected to hear from God through, so too God seems to be increasingly grabbing my attention through some fairly unlikely people as well.

[ 9 : 02 ] So I'm going to share three recent examples of that this morning. One, which I'd say is humbling for me, one which makes me both angry and sad, and one which leaves me hopeful.

We'll do them in that order so we end with the hopeful one. So the humbling one for a start, ways in which I sense God's speaking to me in perhaps unexpected ways. And that happened as I was waiting at Birmingham New Street for a train the other day.

It's fairly busy, you know, bustling atmosphere if you've been to New Street. And yet, I sat and I was flicking through my phone as you do and for me, I was checking out the news and my Twitter feed and all that, getting wound up as is my tendency about politics.

As I was doing that, I was distracted though by this guy in the orange there who was cleaning, who was mopping the floor. And I just watched him for a while and he was doing a really thorough job,

you know, putting real care into it.

Now, no one who was walking past was stopping or looking at him. He was largely invisible to most folks, the kind of person who I'd usually find it easy to ignore.

[10:15] And yet, as I watched him on this occasion doing his thing, just mopping the floor, I had this kind of inner dialogue almost saying to me in my head, you see, that's someone I love.

Right there. Quietly, faithfully doing his job. Doing it for a minimum wage. Now, by all means, keep up with the news, said this voice.

But don't let the news distract you from noticing people like him. Now, that voice, that kind of dialogue, I've come to recognize that kind of gentle but clear voice, I guess, in my head as who I would say is God's Holy Spirit speaking to me.

It spoke in ways I could understand in a language I was used to, knew about what I was thinking about on my phone. It wasn't a lecture or a telling off, but it was a firm steer, shall we say.

steer, I would say, from God that came through this cleaner at Birmingham New Street. That's one example of God speaking to me in perhaps unexpected ways through unexpected people.

[11:28] What else? Well, I was reading an article last week by a journalist and author called Katniss Moran, someone who is a self-declared atheist, something she's pretty clear and public about.

But she was interviewing this guy, Reverend Richard Coles. You'll probably recognise from Strictly and being on various TV and radio shows and if you go back that far he was in the communards, you know, the 80s pop group and all that.

However, following the death of his partner, David, a couple of years ago, he's decided now to retire early from being a vicar, to retire early from his parish role.

And Richard Coles recently said that he was now leaving the church because in his view the rising forces in the Church of England are conservative, punchy, and fundamentalist in terms of scripture, making churches places where gay people are not welcome and that rules me out.

Now, after interviewing him about his early retirement, the journalist Catlin Moran, she had this to say, which is a bit of a lengthy quote, but it's worth hearing her opinion, I think, in full.

[12:50] She says this, I am as godless as a person can be, but Coles life, the struggles, the grief, but also the impulse towards joy and love makes me trust his take on faith, charity, and generosity in a way I feel disinclined to with any other man of faith who's come to my attention.

I can't be the only one who would actively prefer a bookish, dog-loving, gay, bicycling, former pop-star priest over some shouty evangelical or dry-by-the-book dude who appears to be into god-middle management.

If it is the way that the church interprets and speaks that has driven Coles away, I wonder if he might not in the end also be the solution to all this.

I can think of no one else who talks about Christianity in such a compelling, accessible way. How mad to have wasted someone so good at what they do and simply because of whom he loved.

I thought love was supposed to be the church's thing, but what do I know? this was my first and also my last day in church. Now for me, I think those words make me feel both sad and angry because I'd say a self-proclaimed atheist like Kathleen Moran for me speaks more sense about God and the church and love than many others who have the power to change the direction which the Church of England is in particular taken in these current times.

[14:33] I hear her words and they strengthen my personal resolve to do what I can to support church life becoming ever more inclusive. I hear her words and I get the same sense in my head that God has given me a firm steer, only this time perhaps ironically through an atheist journalist.

so again, an unexpected way in which God, I believe, is speaking to me to an unexpected person.

But in thirdly, final example of unlikely people through whom I'd say I've recently heard God speaking to me and this time is this guy, the retired Arsenal, Villa and England footballer, Paul Merson.

And if you're not aware, Paul Merson had a great career as a footballer. He was famous though as well for his goal celebrations which mimicked downing loads of pints that he enjoyed.

Now as time wore on though, as this celebration kind of indicated early on, his addictions to both alcohol and gambling came to the fore and he spent the last few years combining recovery with work as a football pundit.

Last week though, I caught up with a programme that Paul Merson had made called My Walk Through Life in which different celebrities find themselves walking through the countryside as they talk to their selfie stick about their life.

[16:11] Now it's a very peaceful gentle watch but in the clip we're about to see Paul Merson stops off at a church in a village of Lastingham as he walks through North Yorkshire.

I say my prayers every morning, every night to stay away from my addictions and just try and be the best person I can be really. I'm never going to be perfect, I know that but I just need to be a nice person, be kind.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

Amen. It's a prayer that I literally sometimes have to say ten times in a minute just to get me to where I am.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. I'm going to be quiet now for five minutes and just take this in and have a moment and pray for my father-in-law.

[17:43] I mean, faith, I think it's important to have faith. I think some people are religious, just some people ain't that's everybody's opinion, but it definitely helped me, especially the meetings, I mean, AA and GA.

I mean, if you're not well, you go to the doctors and get your medicine and that's what I treat GA meetings like, gamblers and honest meetings and alcoholics and honest meetings like.

If you don't go, you're not getting your medicine, you're not going to get well. If you don't get well, then there's only one way it's going to end up and that's back doing what you were doing.

So, yeah, I have faith. Sometimes, of course, with what everything that goes on in the world, we do question it, but definitely without the GA and AA, you know, I wouldn't be able to live the life I live now.

Even though my wife's great and she is great and she understands me, I still need them meetings to be around people that have been in my position before and have had that experience, strength and hope.

[19:02] Yeah, it's a massive thing for me. You know, I do believe there is a God.

I do believe there is. You know, I don't think for everything I did, you know, like, and I still got to play football is a miracle, really.

It's a miracle. I do look at that like someone was looking over me at all times. My wife goes to church and her mother-in-law goes okay and I don't know anybody who doesn't come out of church and doesn't feel better.

Now, if that's the case, how does it not work? It's like meetings. Never been in a meeting and come out worse, you know, so for me it works.

I do believe. I find his honesty and the way he expresses his faith pretty moving actually. It's about an hour long program.

[20:07] Well worth checking out if you can on iPlayer. Especially I think I find it moving though because he's talking in a way that I never dreamt he would do when he was a footballer back in the 90s and so on. You know, he talks with humility and wisdom.

You know, he actually popped into the Vic for a Coke the other week. One of his mates is a regular there. And Ash, the landlord on the right there, he said to me, he just comes across as a lovely gentle guy.

And I'd say, Ash wouldn't put it in these words, but I would, I'd say that his character is a witness to the faith that he has. And so for me, I hear a hopeful voice from God coming through his life in Paul Merson.

Hopefully not simply because someone like Paul Merson has found God through his ongoing recovery, but more perhaps that kindness is now one of the highest values in his life.

Indeed, he talks at another point in the program that his priority in life is now simply to be kind.

Kindness, which far from being something minor, is one of the fruit of the spirit.

[21:19] Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. It's not to be underrated. And as I think on kindness, I hear that same voice in my head saying, look, whatever else you may be, always be kind, always be kind.

And that's a prayer. That's a fruit. That's an ideal which I regularly ask God's help to aspire to. So, for me, three different ways in which God has spoken to me of late.

An anonymous cleaner at Birmingham New Street, the atheist journalist, Katlin Moran, and the recovering addict and ex-footballer, Paul Merson. Three, as I say, perhaps unexpected characters through whom we might hear God speak, and who for me at least, have recently been channels of God's voice, I believe, to me.

Indeed, just as Peter, the fisherman, and his Galilean friends were unexpectedly empowered and inspired by God to speak in ways which enabled a hugely diverse international crowd of 3,000 people to discover a new faith in Jesus, so too, God is in the business of speaking every day through unlikely or unexpected people.

And that, I think, means two things for us, which I'll finish with. So, firstly, I'd say, in our quest to know ourselves, to know each other, and to know God more fully, let's expect the unexpected to speak to us.

[ 23 : 06 ] We may well hear God through nature, through the Bible, through our own prayer life, and so, perhaps those more predictable ways. But if Pentecost is about anything, it's about being open to the ways in which God can suddenly but profoundly speak into our lives through the most random or unlikeliest of people.

So let's expect the unexpected as we seek to grow in our awareness of God this week. But then, secondly, I think I'd also say these unexpected voices should give each of us encouragement too, since you and I may just be the unexpected person through whom God communicates something of his truth and his love to others.

We may not think we've got the right words. We may not think we've got the right language to speak. I'm sure Peter, this gruff northern fisherman, thought the same thing.

And yet God still supplied what was needed to ensure others could understand him. We may not think we've got the right character, which will mean people might listen to us. But again, I'm sure Peter felt the same thing given all the ups and downs we know about his time with Jesus.

And yet God still used him mightily, so much so that 3,000 people in one day came to faith as a result of the way he spoke, the way he lived, his message of love and kindness and hope.

[ 24 : 36 ] And God can do the same through both you and I because the same spirit that filled and equipped Peter, as the Bible says, the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in you and lives in me.

And so I guess my prayer is Pentecost and beyond, is that you and I, that we may be filled and formed. challenged and encouraged by the same spirit of God who is at work in us and in our world, both in this Pentecost season and beyond.

Amen. Amen.