

Sunday 19th May 2024 - That's The Spirit! : Pentecost

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Preacher: Dave Moss

[0 : 00] Good morning. As Ian has already explained, we're starting our new series, That's the Spirit. So, it's welcome to Pentecost Sunday. We're looking today at what happened on that first Pentecost in Jerusalem.

Pentecost has often been described as the birth of the church. God's Holy Spirit came down in the form of wind and tongues of fire.

And from then onwards, the disciples became fearless evangelists, proclaiming the news about Jesus wherever they went. Or at least that's the theory. But let's rewind a little bit.

Because, if you've heard me recently, I've been commenting on the changing face of British culture and our society's ongoing disconnect from its Christian heritage.

So, today, Pentecost is perhaps where this disconnect is most evident. You'll be lucky if Pentecost gets a mention outside of a church.

[1 : 18] It's almost forgotten in society at large. Pentecost has no commercial value and people don't know what to celebrate.

Last century, when I was young, it used to be known as Whitsun or Whitsunday. And this was followed by Whitsunday, which was a bank holiday.

But Whitsunday, well, it's short for White Sunday, representing the white dove, which often depicts the Holy Spirit. But now, over the last 40 years, we've got a complete disconnect.

So, this month of May, we no longer think about Pentecost, but the fact that we now have two bank holidays. Yeah, that's what we think about.

And I don't know if you can read that from where you are, but compared with other countries, actually, we're rather short-changed on this bank holiday business. Because if you can see from that chart, France and Germany, for example, do rather well out of the bank holidays.

[2 : 31] In the UK, Labour Day, which should be the 1st of May, has become May Day. So, we can fix it to a Monday. And if you remember this year, it was very late.

And Whitsunday has become spring bank holiday. So, it's now totally disconnected from Whitsunday or Pentecost.

So, like, we haven't got a bank holiday tomorrow because it's disconnected. And unlike other countries, you'd be hard-pressed in the UK to find a shop shut today because it's Pentecost.

Whereas if you go to other countries, that wouldn't be the case. So, it's no holiday. It's just an ordinary Sunday like any other. And why is this? Well, we can't have people taking too many holidays, can we?

And above all, it's the exam season in school. And if we had too many holidays, it'd play havoc with that. And when I started teaching, this was also last century, by the way.

[3 : 33] So, exams used to be in June only. But now, because young people have so many exams, it's been spread out to take in May and June.

And so, we can't have children taking time off school and celebrating stuff, can we? That's just not allowed. They need to be back in school doing phonics tests, numeracy tests, SATs.

That's just primary school. And GCSEs and A-levels in secondary schools. And to make things worse, most schools also add in internal tests and exams, which they set themselves, just so it can be total exam season.

And then, of course, there's all the college and university exams. So, as you can see, there's no time for holidays because it's exam season. In the UK, young people now don't even know the word Whitsun.

But in the 50s, 60s and 70s, Whitson was a community event. There were often parties and parades. And in many towns in the north of England, there were Wit Walks.

[4 : 46] Many remember Wit Walks with great fondness. And typically, the parades included brass bands and choirs and girls dressed in white.

And traditionally, Wit Fairs took place. And other customs, such as Morris dancing, were associated with Whitson. Although, in some cases, these have now been transferred to the Springbank Holiday.

But it was all about community. It was all about community. Being called together as a community to celebrate Pentecost or Whitson. Well, what is it we are celebrating exactly?

So, we're here, Pentecost Sunday. We've now become so disconnected from Pentecost that I would argue that we no longer understand the significance of this life-changing event.

I would further argue that, consequently, we've therefore become disconnected in our understanding and the work of person of the Holy Spirit. Particularly the community part of that understanding.

[5 : 54] And as the coming weeks will hopefully show, there's so much to understand about the work of the Holy Spirit. Last week, Matt showed us what happened on the Day of Ascension.

And I liked the talk. I thought it was really good. But I really felt I needed a public holiday to sort of digest what he'd said. Don't you think? Don't you think this makes good sense?

So, today we look at the actual event. What happened on that first Pentecost day? So, this is where we left things last week. Jesus had ascended into heaven to be with the Father.

But Jesus had promised not to leave his followers alone. Jesus can't be with everyone in every place all at once in a physical sense. So, he's sending the Holy Spirit to be with everyone always and everywhere.

This day was the 50th day after Passover. It was also called the Feast of Harvest or the Feast of Weeks. It was one of the three great festivals of the year when people would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate.

[7 : 03] It was an agricultural festival, a community event, when farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop. But it was also a festival when people reminded themselves what God had done for them in the past.

Let's take a look at an interpretation of what happened. When will it come? Jesus said all we have to do is ask.

I have been asking. Every day. The Holy Spirit will come when the time is right. I think we should pray together.

Our Father who is in heaven. Hallowed be your name. Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses.

[8 : 07] As we forgive those who trust us against us. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. We will do our part.

Amen. Come on.. God. Watch out. Watch out. Watch out.

Watch out. Watch out. Watch out. Oh, Christos! I will come back to my hands Oh, Christos! I will come back to my hands Oh, Christos!

Oh, Christos! Oh, Christos! Eiondem Crucifixum Resurrectum Cuidem How did yours look, Sheldon?

Jawswopak, join the operation of peace! We are in the camp! We talk now, people, as well as the covenant available. What is the hope is your destiny!

[9 : 29] Are you speaking back to your own strength and yourself? Are you weak? Are you courageous?

Are you speaking back to your own strength? Uwe hae reis, atos! How can we speak those languages?

The Holy Spirit. He is with us. Now they were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?

How is it that each one of us hears them in our native language?

[11 : 08] What does this mean? Some, however, made fun of them and said, they have had too much wine.

God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.

Pan gluysant hin, vei disbegwydin in i'nai calon, a diwydersant u'th peder a' spostolion erach, beth unu naunig e' veion.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other disciples, Brothers, what shall we do? Peter replied, Peter replied, And let's say, And let's say a person to be baptized on the name of Jesus Christ, so forgive the sins.

So you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins.

[12 : 54] and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Car la promesse est pour vous, pour vos enfants, et pour ceux qui vivent dans les pays lointains, tout ce que le Seigneur notre Dieu fera venir à lui.

The promise is for you and your children, and for all those who are far off, and for all whom the Lord, our God, will call.

With many other words, he warned them, and he pleaded with them, save yourselves from this corrupt generation.

Those who accept his message were baptised, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the last step, if you like, to show that God has fulfilled his promises.

To acknowledge that God has made the crucified Jesus both Lord and Christ. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, in chapter 11, is a symbol of man's continued pride and arrogance.

[14 : 12] They build a tower as though to contain God within their community. The peoples spread out across the earth, and language becomes confused.

Sildur Morelis made this installation of Babel in 2001. I don't know if you can see from the photo there. The first things you are struck by is how big it is. It's a tower that looms above you.

And as you approach, you're also struck by the sound you hear. Because this tower is a tower of radios. Each separate radio that makes up the tower is set at the lowest possible volume, and comes together in a pillar of sound.

These radios pick up all the possible radio stations in that area. And often they speak the same language. But the sheer number of radios mean that the different languages meld together and become confused.

As a result, there's a sense of not knowing what you're hearing, and therefore an impression of the profusion of languages described in Genesis.

[15 : 27] And that's really brought to the fore as you stand there and listen. For Babel comes from the Hebrew word confusion, balal. The tower is also a history of human technology of communication, which has changed the world.

The advent of radio meant that humanity's separated states could in some sense be reversed. The great divides between people would seem to vanish, and relationships could be forged across borders.

And yet, when we listen to all these radios, or indeed today to the wealth of TV and social media we now have, it's hard to distinguish or understand each voice.

It's hard to choose over what to tune into. The pillar of confused sound is a reminder that Babel is a story about our failure to communicate with each other.

And this is our world today. And this is our world today. One of confused dialogue. So here we are at Pentecost.

[16 : 38] This confusion, this lack of understanding, this Babel, is at an end. Because God is speaking loud and clear to everyone from everywhere.

The most impressive part is when the disciples start speaking in other tongues. They spoke their local dialect of Galilean Aramaic. Our equivalent would probably be black country English.

You know, Boston. Most of the visitors would have spoken the common Greek dialect and some Aramaic dialects. But God has brought people from near and far to hear the good news of his kingdom in their own language.

This message is for everyone, wherever they come from. The Tower of Babel was about humans establishing themselves, making themselves sound important.

Pentecost is about God establishing his kingdom, breaking down language and culture. People says, this is what was, Peter said, this is what was spoken of by the prophet Joel.

[17 : 47] In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people. This in itself raises questions for us.

Why is God sending people from different cultures and speaking different languages to these shores? And what is it that we need to learn about our own culture?

God is reminding us of what he's done for us and continues to do for us. Jesus has ascended into heaven, a parallel perhaps of when Moses went up to Mount Sinai.

And then Moses came down again with the tablets of the law. Here, Jesus is coming down again, not with tablets of stone, but with the dynamic energy of the law designed to be written on human hearts.

He gives us his spirit so that we're not left alone. He meets us where we are, sets our hearts on fire, breathes new life and gives us a place in his kingdom.

[19 : 01] God is coming to transform earth with the power of heaven, starting with us. God's Holy Spirit is where you allow him to be.

God is here. God is present by his spirit. God is one you, God is here. And how good we've become at shutting him out and not listening.

Breath, or wind, is a symbol of the spirit of God. Fire, a symbol of his divine presence. The wind and fire are untamable forces.

this is the launch of something new and dramatic. Often people think that asking for the Holy Spirit is wanting more of God. They expect something dramatic to happen. But no, God is enough.

He's already given us everything. It's not a top-up where something dramatic may happen. We're repeatedly told that we do not know how the wind behaves or where it moves.

[20 : 18] And God moves by his Spirit in very many and varied ways, which you may not even notice. Here salvation has begun for those who call on the Lord and discover what he is within them, always.

Afternoon tea and cricket on the green, anyone? I think that's what many people think we are. But do we put our own language and culture and tradition first?

God surpasses our own limited understanding, which is limited by our language, by our culture, by our nationality, and by our place.

Whose clothes are you wearing? Are you wearing or trying to wear the hand-me-downs you've been given? Perhaps you feel comfortable in the cricket clothes and enjoying afternoon tea?

The ideas and beliefs you inherited from your family, your church, or your society? If we're not careful, we end up living a life that's not our own.

[21 : 36] It's just our culture and our upbringing that dictate that life. When God's Spirit blows, everything changes. I don't know how many of you are familiar with this TV program, The Piano.

This is a clip from last week's series. And if you've not seen it, it's where people are invited to play the piano in a railway station. And in this case, it's Edinburgh.

Mika and Lang Lang watch from afar to see if they're good enough to play in a concert later on. I want you to notice three people in this clip.

Look at them carefully. One is the parent. What's the parent up to? One is the behaviour of Claudia Winkleman, in the middle there, the presenter.

And one is the reaction of Lang Lang, the world's renowned pianist, to the right of your photo.

Excuse me. Hi, Song.

[22 : 44] Hi, Claudia. Hi, how are you? Lovely to meet you. Oh, it's a little kid. You look very smart. Thank you. I love the bow tie. Yeah. Oh my God, he's holding a book of mine.

It has to be here to find out. Tell me about you and the piano. So I started when I was three and four or something, yeah? Perfect. And then I started really having lessons.

Okay, and how old are you now, Song? Now I'm 10. Yeah, perfect. I live in Edinburgh for about one and a half year. Edinburgh is a very beautiful city.

Comparing to Hong Kong, Hong Kong is fast-paced and here it is more relaxing. When he was young, we went to a toy shop.

He just went to a toy piano and paid that immediately. He had no interest on other toys at all. I like the piano because it makes people happy and it also makes me happy when I'm playing the piano.

[23 : 49] What are you going to play today? So today I'm going to play Haydn. I'm going to play Haydn Sonata in D major. He's going to play Haydn Sonata. Do you want me to take my thing off?

If you're not too cold. Yeah, maybe I can give it to my dad. Yeah, yeah, genius. Some, you're amazing. Thank you. Close enough to the piano for you? Yeah, that's great. Yeah? Okay, you only play when you're comfortable.

You're fantastic. I'm going to stand with your dad. Exactly. Do your breathing. Good luck, son. He's brilliant.

Oh, that's good. Oh, my God. Oh, that's good. Wow. This is amazing. Oh, boy.

Yeah. It's so musical. It's dramatic. It's a way of playing, kind of. Look at the other child.

[24 : 59] All the children staring at him. Fantastic. Fantastic. It's super expressive.

This is a very difficult highland sonata, which is very hard to play clean. Whoa. Seriously, this is so good.

I think I got to get out there to say a quick high.

You are amazing. You are amazing. A lot of people today. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Sam.

Thank you.

Bravo. Amazing. Amazing, John. Thank you. Good job. It's a beautiful playing. I loved it. I'm so happy. Thanks for bringing the book.

[26 : 14] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. You're my favorite pianist.

Thank you. You're my favorite pianist. Thank you. It's a great honor for me.

Thank you. Oh, you're so cute. Thank you. Maybe see you later. Sam, are you happy? Yeah. Do you feel emotional? I'm too happy. Yeah, you're all right. Well done. Happy tears.

Yeah. Happy tears from both of you. Yeah. Sam. Would you take him on as a student? For sure.

Yeah. No, he plays really well.

He's so sweet. He was wearing a bow tie. Why don't more kids wear bow ties? We're missing a trick. God, through his Holy Spirit, is there alongside us every step of the way, encouraging us to play sweet music, standing alongside us as a loving parent, watching over us as we play, encouraging us, enthusing us, delighted with even the smallest thing like a bow tie, observing and marveling at our achievement.

God is visibly moved when we look to him for guidance and inspiration. Keep playing. Hold on to the bow tie.

[27 : 45] God has sent and is sending his Holy Spirit simply so we know his presence with us. You are not alone. God sends us his very presence.

But as we've seen, God comes to us in the person through his Holy Spirit. God the Father is watching over us.

Jesus is presence with us. The Spirit inspires us. The Spirit renews us. The Spirit is uncomfortable. The Spirit seeks justice. The Spirit comforts us. The Spirit takes us places we could never dream of. And the Spirit makes us ask questions. The Spirit freezes. The Spirit is gentle.

[28 : 49] The Spirit sets us on fire. And the Spirit is totally unpredictable. The Spirit is not contained.

The Spirit sets us free. Through his Spirit, we are called to be one with God. God has sent his Holy Spirit to you and to me.

That is Pentecost. God has sent us.