

That's The Spirit - 23rd May 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] Hey everyone, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious to be with you today.

If you don't know me, my name's Mats, I've got the privilege of being the Vicar of St. John's and it's oh so good to be with you today. Indeed, even if the weather at the moment can frankly do one, the hope is that we might experience some of the warmth, the light, the refreshment of God as we gather together in this online way now.

Today, well today is the Sunday we know as Pentecost, the day when we remember and celebrate the way in which God's presence, the Holy Spirit, came in a tangible way to dwell in the lives of those first followers of Jesus.

That Holy Presence continues in us to this day and we'll be exploring the significance of that truth as we go through our time together. Equally, Lottie in today's Sunday Stars session is also looking at the Holy Spirit, complete with a hairdryer and a ping pong ball this week.

So do check that uplifting session out if you've got younger ones with you. Back here though, well before we totally tuck into what's on offer here God, we want to thank you for your presence with us.

[1 : 2 2] A presence which is as all-encompassing as the air we breathe. Indeed, as the psalmist says, where can I go from your spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you're there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

And so may we be assured or reassured by that truth today that no matter what we go through, may we be convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so it's not perhaps a question of asking you to be with us today, God, because you already are. Rather, it's asking that we might be open and receptive, please, to your voice, your presence with us, that the potential you've placed in each of us might be nurtured and fulfilled by you.

Thank you, God. Amen. All right. Well, as I said, today's a day in the church's calendar known as Pentecost.

[3 : 0 0] Pentecost was originally and still is a Jewish harvest festival, a celebration of the beginning of the wheat harvest. And in biblical times, people would travel from all over the Mediterranean to gather in Jerusalem to celebrate this festival at a temple there.

And yet beyond just this harvest celebration, Pentecost has since become known as the day when the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us, arrived in pretty spectacular fashion.

And so here's the story of that day from the book of Acts. If you recall, Jesus has ascended into heaven, and so the disciples were now following Jesus' instruction to wait for what would come next.

And so we're told this. When the day of Pentecost came, they 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. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. Now, there were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

[4 : 24] 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?

Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene.

Visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs, we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own languages. 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 stood up with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd.

Those who accepted his message were baptised and about three thousand were added to their number that day. Now, it's a crackerjack of a story, a pretty awe-inspiring event which includes the sound of Russian wind, tongues of fire, multiple languages and about three thousand people becoming followers of Jesus in one day.

[5 : 44] I mean, just one of these aspects would be pretty remarkable, but their combination means there are multiple layers to this Pentecost event which are each worth reflecting on as to how they might apply to our life and faith today.

I mean, for a start, let's kick off as the story of Pentecost does by thinking about wind. So, if we recall, it says this.

Suddenly, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. Why might wind be a way in which God's spirit could be represented?

Well, I guess on one level, there's a nice interplay with words here, since the Greek term for wind and spirit is one and the same.

It's the word *pneuma*, from where we get words like *pneumatic*. And it's a useful correlation because just like the wind, we can't see God's spirit, you know, God's presence.

[6 : 46] But we can recognise and feel its effects. Indeed, this word *pneuma* is also translated in the Bible as *breath*. And so, as we've looked at before, from Adam receiving the breath, you know, the spirit, the *pneuma* of God in his lungs in Genesis, to the resurrected Jesus breathing on the disciples and saying, receive my spirit, receive my *pneuma*.

However, the breath, the wind, the spirit of God is the very thing which gives us life. And yet the wind experienced at Pentecost is not described in gentle terms like *breath*.

Nor is it simply a breeze. No, rather, it was felt as like a strong, violent kind, wild even. It's a picture and sensation of God's presence causing disruption, of blowing the bloody doors off, if you like, and throwing everything up in the air.

As I say, there's a wildness in this description. A term which, interestingly, is reflected in the way the ancient Celts in our land thought of the Holy Spirit.

The spirit, the spirit for them, wasn't gentle like a dove. No, rather, they preferred to describe the spirit as a wild goose. Untameable, powerful, riding on and one with the wind.

[8 : 21] Now, I don't know if a wild wind is a way in which you tend to picture or think of God's spirit moving. Yes, there's a gentleness at times to God. But here at Pentecost, there's equally an unsettling, unpredictable nature to God's presence with us too.

A wildness which is not so much scary as it is exciting, thrilling even. Like those times you stand on the seafront and watch the waves crashing up on a windy day.

It's the idea of the spirit of God as having real movement, momentum, mystery even. Indeed, Jesus himself picks up on this idea in John's Gospel when he describes God's spirit in this way.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.

Now, we've looked at the positives of disruption before, but maybe for us as individuals, I wonder after so many months of a pretty predictable, static, kind of lockdown life, we're on the cusp of entering into a new season with new possibilities.

[9 : 42] From this Pentecost story, we see that the spirit of God is an agent of change, blowing wherever it pleases. So I wonder what the wind of change in our lives might look like over the coming weeks and months.

For the churches we belong to, for St John's, what might the wind of change look like in how we meet, how we serve, how we worship, what we prioritise?

For the National Church, certainly the Church of England, I'd suggest a wind of change is years, decades, maybe even centuries overdue in many ways.

What might that look like? Well, for starters, I think I'd suggest closing a third of the buildings, ditching most senior roles, setting off hoarded assets, prioritising community transformation and setting people free to be the Church by not pedestalling ordained roles because clericalism is about as far removed from Jesus' model of leadership as is possible to be.

But what do I know? And yet in terms of wisdom for the way ahead for us individually and collectively, what's interesting is that this violent wind which came from heaven is said to have filled the whole house where they were sitting.

[11 : 07] Now, we've spoken before about the way Jesus uses water as a picture of what it means to be filled with the Spirit, where our spiritual thirst is quenched.

But here, the picture of being filled is not related to water, but to wind. And for me this is significant because it brings to mind movement again, such as the way in which a boat has its sails filled by the wind and is then taken where the wind enables it to go.

So again, I wonder for you, what new movement, what fresh momentum might God's Spirit be blowing into your sails, taking you in a different direction perhaps as lockdown increasingly lifts?

Or maybe you long for God's Spirit to simply help you get going again after so long. Maybe you long for a gust of wind to awake and invigorate you once again.

Indeed, with this in mind, it's interesting that in a nautical, sailing sense, the term used to describe an area of calm weather where there's a lack of wind is the word doldrums.

[12 : 23] Technically, the belt around the earth near the equator where sailing ships sometimes get stuck on windless waters. We talked about languishing the other week.

Maybe being in the doldrums is another way to think of our current state. If so, well, perhaps our prayer on this Pentecost Sunday might be one of asking God to fill us with the Spirit as the wind fills the sails of a boat, enabling it, enabling us to get going again.

Fill us with your Spirit, God. Fill our sails. Skipper us forward to new adventures, new horizons, we pray. What else?

Well, after the wind comes the fire. As we're told this, they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

Why fire? Well, from Moses and a burning bush to the pillar of fire guiding the ancient Israelites by night. Fire in the Bible is regularly associated with God's presence.

[13 : 35] The relief is, though, that what appeared over the disciples seemed to be tongues of fire. It wasn't real flames licking their heads, you know.

So it's a relief because the smell of burning hair can get pretty stinky, I tell you. But again, a bit like a sound like the blowing of a violent wind earlier. It's a picture, this fire, of God's presence, God's energy.

Indeed, in the Bible, this kind of holy fire is sometimes referred to as a refining fire. Fire which literally burns away the dross to leave only that which is pure.

For me, I've never really seen this idea of refining fire as being one of judgment. No, rather, it's about transformation, improvement. We might say sanctification.

And so, again, over these recent months, what would you say might be the dross in your life that you could do with God's refining fire to burn away?

[14 : 45] What habits, what choices, what practices might be clogging you up, you know, tarnishing your ability to live in ways which might better reflect God's image in your life?

You know, a bit like the Japanese organising consultant Marie Kondo recommends refining our clutter by simply asking whether an item we own gives us joy or not.

And if not, then give it away. What of our habits? You know, the way we spend our time, our money, our conversation. What is it about the way we live which brings God and therefore us and others joy?

And conversely, what is it that brings us and others and ultimately God down? Because whatever brings us down, I'd say the fire of God's Pentecost spirit is in the business of refining that stuff and melting it away.

Indeed, with this in mind, one practical question I often ask myself in terms of prioritising habits and so on, and it's a bit morbid, but it works for me.

[15 : 58] It's this question. So thinking about how I spend my time, I ask myself, on your deathbed, Matt, what will you regret not spending more of your time doing?

And for me, the answers include time spent with friends and family, spending time outside in nature, travelling to new places, experiencing new things.

And perhaps above all, making a positive difference to the community to which I belong. They're my practical priorities, I suppose, both for my own well-being and hopefully for the sake of others.

But then these priorities also shape my reverse response to that deathbed question, in that I'm not going to regret decisions I've made not to, in my view, waste my time, making sure all my clothes are ironed, or spending days on an Xbox, or religiously following fashion trends, or spending hours scrolling through Facebook from a fear of missing out.

Now, each to their own. I mean, perhaps being an immaculately ironed, fashionable Xbox-playing Facebook fanatic, may be how you want to spend your life, and if so, good luck to you.

[17 : 20] But for me, well, that wouldn't give me joy. Indeed, I remember in my 20s, I'd become a bit addicted to my PlayStation, and so one day, I just decided I didn't want to live with that daily regret of what, for me, was so much time spent with so little to show for it.

So I just gave the console and all my games away. Proper cold turkey, but I knew I wouldn't regret it. Or on my deathbed, think, ah, damn it, I wish I'd played more PlayStation.

You know, I don't want to be all holier than now, because you might think that me watching West Ham is a ridiculous waste of time, for example. And I guess this overachieving season aside, you may well have a point with that.

And I know for me, this process of weighing up priorities, this process of refinement, is one which I continue to wrestle with in a stumbling way to this day.

But what about you? What about your priorities? God's priorities, maybe, for how you spend your time, your energy, your money?

[18 : 31] What could you make time to do more of by spending less time on other stuff? Stuff which, maybe in the grand scheme of things, you know doesn't give you much joy anyway.

And as we involve God in that practical process and ask for the refining fire of the Spirit to purify us in our conduct. I guess alongside what we do, what of our character might need refining too?

Burning away the dross of gossip, of greed, of jealousy, of bitterness perhaps. Those things which tarnish and discolour our capacity to bear God's image in our lives.

You know, God can work on those kinds of things in each of us. That's what the Spirit does. And so may your holy fire rest on us, God.

Refining and purifying anything from us which doesn't bring love, joy and peace to us, to others and to you, God. And then thirdly, after the wind and the fire, what comes next?

[19 : 47] Well, we're told all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. Now, whilst some translations say speak in other tongues rather than languages, it doesn't seem to me to be an example of these early followers of Jesus speaking with what we might call the gift of tongues.

This mysterious, heavenly language which God sometimes inspires in people as a way for them to pray or prophesy. You know the one, I've used this before, but those words which sound like a series of coastal towns in Devon.

Shalakum, Woolakum, Babakum, Ilfrakum. You know, no, we're not talking languages or tongues in that overtly spiritual sense. Rather, since we're told that the international crowd around hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own languages, this is more about the way in which the Holy Spirit enables these early believers to communicate the good news of God's love in ways that other people, other cultures maybe, could understand.

You know, God is in the communication business. That's why the word became flesh. That's why these disciples were given this miraculous ability to speak in other languages.

God wants the wonders of his love to be shared in ways which resonate, in ways which can be understood. And so what might that mean for us to have that same spirit of Pentecost shaping the ways in which we communicate?

[21 : 27] Well, on one level, I'd suggest it means asking God to help us speak of our faith in ways which can be understood. Not using jargon, not using obscure metaphors from the Bible to explain things, but rather being able to speak in our own way and in our own words about the difference that God's love makes in our lives.

You know, asking someone if they've been washed in the blood of the Lamb is going to put them right off, but talking instead about the sense of peace we get in knowing that even though we mess up all the time, there's a God who loves us to bits no matter what we've done.

Well, that's more like the language people might resonate with. This God stuff is weird enough for most people to get on board with, so let's not allow our language to complicate things further.

No, do you know what Jesus spoke about most of all in the stories he told to help people understand God? It was money and work. Two universal things which everyone could identify with.

And so for us, whether it's money or work, raising kids, programs on telly, relationships, food, shopping, sport, music, you know, all manner of everyday things, maybe let's ask God to give us the imagination, the words to connect these shared everyday experiences with what it means to know God's love in our lives.

[23 : 05] And if sharing our faith through our words isn't something we're comfortable or confident in, don't worry. As perhaps the most effective way to communicate the wonders of God's love in ways people can understand is simply to live them out.

An act of kindness, a gesture of generosity, an offer of help, an unexpected gift, a commitment of time, a hug of sympathy. These are all ways in which the Spirit can help us to share God's love with others.

What's that often quoted saying attributed to St. Francis? Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words. You know, if everyone's love language is slightly different, then acts of service, quality time, touch, or gifts will actually be received by far more people than simply words on their own would be.

And so, as the Spirit enables us to communicate in ways which others can understand, I wonder what that might look like in your life this week.

How might your church, our church, communicate God's love through its actions as much as, or probably even better, more than it does through simply what we say?

[24 : 34] God, may you give the language we need through words or actions to help those we live alongside grasp for themselves the wonders of your love, we pray.

Indeed, wonder is perhaps a good word to finish on today. It's following the wind, the fire, and the languages. In response to Peter addressing the crowds, we're told about 3,000 people became followers of Jesus that day.

No doubt, having had their spiritual selves awakened by the wonder of all that they'd seen, heard, and experienced. You know, I guess that's the same prayer for us.

That our own sense of wonder might be awakened this Pentecost by the wild, refining, communicating presence of God's Spirit at work in our lives.

And may those we live alongside also experience the wonders of God's love both directly for themselves but also through the way we live our lives, empowered and filled by the Spirit of God.

[25 : 52] Indeed, with all that in mind, and perhaps as a soundtrack to our own prayers now, here's a track called Holy Spirit which the St. John's Band have recorded for us this week.

The St. John's Band Living Hope Your Presence, Lord I've tasted and seen of the sweetest of loves where my heart becomes free and my shame is undone Your Presence, Lord

Holy Spirit, you are welcome here Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere Your glory, God is what our hearts long for To be overcome by your presence, Lord Your presence, Lord Your presence, Lord Lord There's nothing worth more There's nothing worth more that could ever come close that could ever come close Nothing can compare Your presence, Lord Your presence, Lord Your presence, Lord

Your presence, Lord Your presence, Lord I've tasted and seen of the sweetest of loves Where my heart becomes free and my shame is undone Your presence, Lord Holy Spirit, You are welcome here Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for To be overcome by Your presence, Lord

Your presence, Lord Let us become more aware of Your presence Let us experience the glory of Your goodness Let us become more aware of Your presence Let us experience the glory of Your goodness Let us become more aware of Your presence Let us experience the glory of Your goodness Let us become more aware of Your presence

[30 : 16] Holy Spirit, You are welcome here Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for To be overcome by Your presence, Lord Your presence, Lord Your presence, Lord Splendid stuff. And big thanks to the band there for their musical offering this week. Do feel free to share this video around on Facebook and with friends if it's been helpful for you.

Splendid stuff. And big thanks to the band there for their musical offering this week. Do feel free to share this video around on Facebook and with friends if it's been helpful. And as usual, there's an extra time video following up today's session with questions and further thoughts to consider should you wish.

Thanks very much for being part of this week. Happy Pentecost to you. And until next time, let's go with God's blessing resting on us.

And so, may the blessing of God, the one known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may the blessing of God unsettle, refine and equip us for the road ahead.

That as we are inspired by the Spirit, so may that same inspiration be a blessing to all those who we love and live alongside, both now and always. Amen.