

Sunday 8th June 2025 - Living Prayer: Pentecost

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0:00] We are continuing this Sunday series that we started last week called Living Prayer.! A series in which we're exploring ways in which prayer, you know, this way of connecting and relating and engaging with God can become more a part of our everyday life.

However, as I said at the top, today is also Pentecost, the day which is named after a Jewish harvest festival, a celebration of the beginning of the wheat harvest in ancient times.

And indeed, in biblical times, people would travel from all over the Mediterranean region to gather in Jerusalem to celebrate at the temple there. And yet beyond it being just a harvest celebration, Pentecost has since become known as the day in the life of the early church when the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us, arrived in pretty spectacular fashion.

So we're combining these two themes today of prayer and of Pentecost. So let's see what God might be wanting to say to us this morning. In fact, to get us going, I'm going to watch a video of a Bible reading from Acts chapter 2, which tells a story of how God's Spirit was poured out on those first followers of Jesus during their Pentecost festival in Jerusalem.

So have a look at this. When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

[1:39] 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 tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now, there 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?

Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Then Peter stood up with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd, Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you.

Listen carefully to what I said. I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said,
I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, I said, these people are
not drunk, as you suppose.

[3 : 24] It's only nine in the morning. No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams, and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

God is saved. Fellow Israelites, listen to this. Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him as you yourselves know.

This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge. And you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

[4 : 41] Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this. God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, Brothers, what shall we do? Peter replied, Repent and be baptized.

Every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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

Those who accepted this message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day. The Holy Spirit It's a great story, a pretty awe-inspiring event, which includes the sound of rushing wind, the tongues of fire, and this special ability to speak in other languages.

[6 : 17] Indeed, it seems in each of these three themes, you know, the wind, the fire, the words, I suspect there's something for us to take on board about the way God is still present and wanting to work with us and in us today.

So if we look at these three in turn, let's kick off with this windy way in which God's Spirit is said to have appeared. And we're told this in that reading there, that suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Now, why might a wind be the way in which God's Spirit is represented? But if you were here last week, or you've caught up online, we were thinking last week about the breath of God, when we're told Jesus breathed on them, his disciples, on that Easter Sunday afternoon and said, receive the Holy Spirit.

And you may recall, we said last week that both the Hebrew word for spirit, which is ruach, and the Greek word for spirit, which is pneuma, these two languages in which the Old and the New Testament were originally written.

Both those words for spirit, they can also mean breath, double meaning perhaps. But actually there's a triple meaning because these words ruach and pneuma, they can also be translated as wind.

[7 : 48] So spirit, breath, wind. In the Bible there's a lot of crossover between these three understandings. And just as God's Spirit, God's breath, as we saw last week, gives us life itself, so God's Spirit is also like the wind, perhaps something we can't see, but we can certainly recognise and feel its effects.

And yet the wind experienced at Pentecost. It's not described in gentle terms like a breeze or anything. No, it's this word, this violent wind.

It's a strong and wild, even exhilarating wind. Now we don't know if these disciples literally felt the wind in their hair and so on.

Because the Bible says that it was a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven. Which kind of implies, perhaps maybe not, perhaps it was the sound rather than the literal wind they experienced.

But regardless of that, the fact that we're told this sound, at least, of rushing wind, filled the whole house where they were sitting.

[8 : 59] What is language of being filled? It's similar in the way that we might say, think about a boat having its sails filled, and then taken where the wind enables it to go.

Strikes me, indeed I wonder, for me, wonder for you, wonder for us, if this being filled, sailing kind of idea might be a picture which perhaps resonates with where we're at.

Indeed, where we might like to be with God at the moment. This sense of needing or wanting God's Spirit, God's wild wind, to fill your sails perhaps, my sails, and take us either further on with Him, or even in a completely new direction in life.

Again, we talked last week about seeing or experiencing God's Spirit in as gentle and as constant a way as the breath in our lungs. You know, that breathing in and breathing out.

And that's certainly a precious thing. But here, on this Pentecost Sunday, it seems there's also scope for the same Spirit to hit us like a gust of wind, you know, blowing through us in a more powerful but equally precious way as the breath in our lungs.

[10 : 16] In fact, it's interesting that when Jesus describes the way in which God's Spirit works, He puts it like this in John's Gospel. He says, 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. And maybe that's it for us today.

Maybe that's the focus. We might have a rough idea, perhaps, about the way we'd like our life to pan out. We might have our hopes for the future. But with this verse in mind, with that Pentecost experience in mind, I wonder if perhaps what God asks of us most of all is in effect to hoist our sails and trust the Spirit to take us where God knows will be best for us.

And maybe that's a prayer for you in this season of life, perhaps, to not be so worried about the specifics. I know I get worried about specifics too much. You need to trust God in a bigger picture, perhaps.

To trust that God's wind, God's Spirit will take us in the right direction and at the right speed that we need to go. And perhaps our job is to remain faithful and open to God in simply keeping our sail hoisted, if you like, and see where God's Spirit takes us.

[11 : 39] Alternatively, though, perhaps you might feel again like you're in a boat in life and you've got your sails up and you want to trust God.

But perhaps, if you're honest, perhaps not a lot seems to be happening in recent times. It's interesting that in a nautical sailing sense, the term that's used to describe an area of calm weather, where there's a lack of wind, is this word.

It's the doldrums, which is technically, I gather, the belt around the earth near the equator, where sailing ships sometimes get stuck on very windless waters. And so maybe, I don't know, maybe you feel you're kind of in the doldrums at the moment, a bit stuck, maybe not feeling much at all.

Where life has just become a bit too flat, a bit too predictable, perhaps. If so, if that's us, maybe a prayer for us on this Pentecost Sunday might be for God's Spirit to get going, you know, to blow afresh in your life.

To come like that sudden rushing wind and fill you anew, enabling you to get out of the doldrums and get going in your faith, in your life again. Maybe the prayer today might be as simple but as profound as say, come Holy Spirit, and without any further agenda on our part, see how God arrives, what God does, where God leads us.

[13 : 18] That's the wind. What else though? After the wind comes the fire. As we're told that these disciples saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came out to rest on each of them.

Why fire in particular? Well, we'll probably know that from Moses and the burning bush to the pillar of fire guiding the ancient Israelites by night, fire is regularly associated in the Bible with God's presence.

I think the good news though is that what appeared over these disciples, it seemed to be tongues of fire. You know, not real flames licking their heads. That would have been a risk assessment and a half, I tell you, going on.

And the smell of burning hair is never a pleasant one. I see that might have put them off a little bit. But what seemed to be tongues of fire came and separated on their heads. Again, a bit like maybe the sound of the blowing wind.

It's a vision, perhaps, a picture of God's presence, of God's energy at work in their lives. Indeed, in the Bible, this kind of holy fire that rests on these disciples, sometimes referred to a kind of refining fire.

[14 : 34] Think of it like a fire used in the smelting of metal to burn away any impurities. I think the technical term for what's got rid of in this smelting process is dross.

Dross, I like that word. Dross, leaving only what's precious and pure. And the dross is what's got rid of. And as such, with this refining fire idea in mind, I've never really seen God's fire as being one of judgment in a punishing or painful sense.

Now, instead, to me, it seems it's all about this refinement, this improvement, this transformation. I guess the technical word is sanctification of us.

The process by which God refines us, refines me, refines you to get rid of the dross, the rubbish in our lives through his purifying love.

So again, I wonder, wonder for me, wonder for you, what might we say would be the dross in our lives that God might be wanting to bring to the surface, if you like, and burn away?

[15 : 45] What habits, what choices, what practices might be clogging us up, spoiling things, maybe tarnishing our ability to know God's fullness in our lives?

I suspect deep down, if there's something going on that we know is dross, if you like, that we're doing, I suspect we'll know what those are.

I'm not going to ask you to share them with your neighbor, don't worry about that. But it would be those things, perhaps we try to ignore, perhaps we try to deny, but deep down, we might be frustrated by our inability to kick them, perhaps.

We might be embarrassed about them if people knew, we might even be ashamed sometimes if those things came to light. And I guess two thoughts on this, really.

I guess firstly, as we said last week, wherever we're at, whatever we're doing, whatever we're not doing, God knows already. God knows all about the dross in my life, in your life.

[16 : 52] And he still loves us, still loves me, still loves you, and always will. So in the same way we can trust God's spirit, God's breath, God's wind to fill our lives, so too, we can trust and ask for God's refining fire to melt away our impurities, our dross.

But then secondly, I wonder, if you think about like a candle or a log fire or something, when you watch fire, you can't help but gaze, kind of distracts you, it holds your attention from anything else, and you can't help but be attentive to that fire.

I wonder, on this Pentecost Sunday that the disciples experienced, I wonder if the visually captivating presence of what seemed like tongues of fire was God's way of saying to them, and perhaps God's way of saying to us, you know, look, pay attention to this.

I want you to be attentive to what I'm doing. I'm serious about this. My purifying, refining fire is a serious thing. I want you to notice what I'm doing. I want you to pay attention.

I want you to be engaged. But in paying attention, I want you to play your part in this partnership we have. I want you to take responsibility in this refining process as well.

[18 : 17] So that instinct, that dross-like habit we might have perhaps of acting selfishly maybe, that tendency we might have to gossip, you know, I don't know what's going on in the quiet of your life, you know, that habit of watching porn or whatever, that affair we might be tempted by, I suspect with this image of fire, God is simply saying to us, look, stop it.

Stop it. Because it can be so damaging to us and to others. And if that idea of just stopping doing something, maybe if that sounds too simplistic, too hard for us, then I suspect we'd do well to remember that one of the fruit of God's spirit that's listed in Galatians 5, but one which we often, or I find, easy to overlook or dismiss, is this one.

The fruit of the spirit is self-control. Self-control. Not God taking control, but self-control. The ability and the personal responsibility that God's spirit grows in us to resist temptation, to reject sin, to be refined, you know, and to instead choose love and light and life.

And so maybe that might be your prayer today. I know that's mine. For God to purify our lives, our minds, our hearts.

To grow in us that self-control. So that every ounce of us would be pleasing to God, shining to God.

[20 : 02] So again, we might pray on a day like this especially. You know, come Holy Spirit. Come Holy Fire. You know, melt me and mould me anew.

That might be our prayer today. But then thirdly, after the wind, after the fire, perhaps even more fascinating is what comes next, because we're then told that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.

It says other languages here. Some translations say other tongues. But it seems it's not the gift of tongues that we sometimes talk about, this mysterious language that God can inspire in people as a way of praying or prophesying.

But instead, this seems to be some very human languages, multilingual languages, since we're told that the international crowd who had gathered, they exclaimed, look, we hear them, these disciples, declaring the wonders of God in our own languages.

And there's lots we could unpack here. But I wonder if today, perhaps the most relevant thing to notice is the way in which the Spirit moves from being something these disciples experience for themselves, you know, with the wind, with the fire.

[21 : 26] And then it moves to inspiring something in them, which is primarily for the benefit of others. After the in-working, if you like, then it's this out-working, a way in which Peter and the other disciples could communicate the wonders of God's love to people, yeah, but crucially, in ways they could understand.

And we're told that those who accepted, those who heard and accepted Peter's message, were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.

That's some achievement. That's some message from Peter. I tell you, he must have been some preacher. And yeah, I don't know about you, but sometimes I'm aware that when I try to share something of God, either up front or in one-on-one conversations with people, or talk to them about faith stuff, you know, not here, but sometimes people will look at me like I'm speaking a foreign language sometimes.

You know, they get that kind of just baffled, confused look on their face. Not rude, not disinterested, it's not their fault, but it's like what I'm trying to say or communicate just doesn't register, doesn't make sense to them.

Now, this could be my fault. I could just be talking gibberish, I know. But I try, and I know many of us try, to find words, to find metaphors, to find the right language that speaks of God in as accessible a way as possible, ditching jargon, if you like, in favour of real life examples and so on.

[23 : 02] And that effort, that's important, because the last one we want is for people to miss out on who God is, simply because we haven't put the thought or the time in to think about how we might share God's good news with them.

But maybe, again, in partnership with our own effort, maybe a prayer for us today could be that God would indeed give us the words, the way, the tone, the illustrations, the imagination, to share with others what we believe and know and feel in ways that they will be able to take on board and understand.

So, again, perhaps we could pray, come, Holy Spirit, and inspire my words so that I may speak of you in ways that can be truly heard.

And yet what's interesting is that in the book of Acts, straight after this special day of Pentecost and the unique opportunity it gave these disciples, this same spirit evidently grew in these disciples what is perhaps the most effective way of all for helping other people to come to know God for themselves.

What might that have been? What might that be for us? We're going to watch a second, a little final clip for today from the book of Acts, which comes straight after that Pentecost story in Acts chapter 2, a reading in which we see what practical difference the coming of God's Holy Spirit at Pentecost made for the ongoing lives of these early followers of Jesus.

[24 : 45] Have a look at this. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

[25 : 57] And again, it's a great passage, and there's so much we could unpack about these priorities that it says about teaching and prayer, generosity, hospitality, and so on.

But I think the thing that struck me afresh was the way in which these early followers of Jesus are described at the very beginning of that little passage there as being devoted.

Devoted to the apostles' teaching, to the breaking of bread, to prayer. Yes, all those things are mentioned. But also devoted to the fellowship.

It's not a word we often use, fellowship. But it means they were devoted to one another. To the collective, to the community. And it's a strong word, devoted.

I don't know what you would say you're devoted to in life. Again, it's not a word I often use. I'm devoted to West Ham, I suppose. More devoted to God. But it's not a word I use that often. But it's a word whose root originally includes a sense of making vows, of promising.

[27 : 07] It's essentially being devoted to one another in this instance, to one another in love. It's a mutual sharing of care and compassion, of empathy and of encouragement.

And for us, what does it mean to be devoted? Well, I'd suggest this devotion may be best expressed through, say, our willingness to commit to turning up and joining in with the stuff of fellowship wherever and whenever we can.

It probably means talking to and taking an interest, welcoming new people into our community. It means being honest in community about reality of our own lives with each other.

Because it's through that honesty that love can best be given and received. And above all, I think it seems we can best express our loving devotion to one another by doing what the Bible says love is, by being patient with each other, by being kind, by not envying or boasting, but by rejoicing in the truth, loving in ways which protect and trust, which hope and which persevere with one another.

And yet as good as this devotion, this love might be for us as a kind of internal community, the beauty is that it also seems to be the most effective way in which other people beyond our church community might encounter the good news of Jesus for themselves too.

[28 : 47] You see, as Jesus himself had said to these disciples just a few weeks before Pentecost, he said, by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Yes, our personal experience of God's love is vital. And we'll have time in a moment to respond to that personal experience by worshipping collectively in prayer and in song.

But the whole point of that inner personal work, indeed it seems the whole point of the Holy Spirit filling that room at Pentecost was to enable people to grow in love and to be devoted to one another.

Why was that the point? Because it's through that love, through that devotion, that fondness for fellowship, that commitment to community, that more people will come to experience the fullness of God's love for themselves.

How does that work though? How does it spill out, if you like, like the Spirit did from that room out of here? Or thinking of here, I think the hope is that not only will our sense of genuine love resonate with people when they walk in through our doors, but it's more that as each of us are shaped by the devotion and the fellowship of love by God here, so we'll be able to take that love with us out into our homes, into our streets, our workplaces, our social circles, and so on.

[30 : 27] Through being devoted to God and one another in fellowship, we'll become better people, fueled and filled by the love that we receive from God through one another and therefore be more equipped and more effective in sharing that same love with all those who God has given us to live alongside.

Indeed, maybe, I wonder in all of this, maybe that outworking, maybe that's the best Pentecost prayer of all that we could pray today. That sense of come, Holy Spirit, and renew our devotion to you and to one another so that all may come to know your love in their lives through us.