

Sermon for 24th May 2026, Year A, Pentecost

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Acts 2:1-21

Sermon

This great feast of Pentecost, which falls 50 days after Easter, was not originally a Christian invention purely to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the first birthday of the Church. Already by Jesus's day, the name 'Pentecost' had been given by Greek speakers to the third of the three great festivals of Judaism, which was in Hebrew known as the festival of Shavuot, or 'Weeks' in English.

Shavuot, like many community festivals, gained several overlapping meanings over time. It was, originally, an agricultural festival – the celebration of the conclusion of the grain harvests that, in the hot middle eastern climate, began at Passover with the barley harvest and then transitioned into a frantic wheat harvest in the seven weeks and one day – 50 days - until Shavuot. It was the one Jewish festival where leavened bread was offered up to God, rather than the unleavened bread of Passover.

But Shavuot had, by Jesus's day, also become a time of thanksgiving for the Jewish Law – the Torah – and particularly the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, and it seems quite probable that we are supposed to notice a parallel between the birth of the chosen people of God at Sinai, and the birth of the Christian Church with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem.

There is, however, a very sharp contrast between these two 'births', and that is the difference between the giving of a written Law, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which in many cases, inspired Christians to move beyond legalistic religious instructions to a more inclusive and relational understanding of God's will.

We can see the impact of this from the very beginning of the Church. Who, for example, are the ones who receive the Holy Spirit? Is it just the twelve male disciples – now including Matthias? Apparently not. The passage from Acts says that “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place,” and you might assume this is just the twelve apostles, but if you look back to the previous chapter you see that it says there were about 120 believers present, including ‘the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers,’ and they were all praying together. So it seems reasonable to assume that all of these received the Holy Spirit, especially since when Peter tries to preach about what has happened, he refers back to the prophecy of Joel, who declared that “your sons and daughters will prophesy” and “even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit.”

So, it seems that all the believers, whatever their status or rank in society, are given these great gifts of wisdom, conviction, and communication, so that they can better convey the truth that they have experienced. This inclusiveness follows a pattern that we see repeated throughout the book of Acts, that the Holy Spirit has a tendency not to discriminate based on any human standards, but simply includes anyone and everyone whose heart is yearning to trust in God and to belong to God’s family. The Spirit is more inclusive than the Church!

It’s often been said about this coming of the Holy Spirit that it acts as a kind of reversal of the divisions that God imposed on humanity due to their arrogance in building the tower of Babel in order to reach God. In that story, God’s punishment for human arrogance was the dividing of people into different languages who could no longer communicate with each other. And now, finally, the Holy Spirit is given to reunite people in a new humble unity of mutual love.

But it’s not quite a reversal. God doesn’t remove diversity and reinstate a unified human culture and single language. Instead, the richness of diversity remains, but where there was exclusion, now all are included, and a new ability is given to

enable the different peoples to hear God's message. So, the gift of Pentecost is not a new calling to strict, rigid unity, but to love and understanding across difference. Thus, the cacophony of harsh voices fighting to dominate one another becomes a harmony of praise, and authentic community is fashioned out of potential adversaries.

But many Christians across our world over the centuries (and still today) have become caught up in trying to reinforce rigidity and uniformity, not only in Church teaching and practice but also throughout society. Such people continue to assume that there can be only one correct set of beliefs, and only one correct way to worship God, and only one correct way to live. They are very comfortable with Laws and Commandments – so long as they are the ones to draft or approve them – but far less comfortable with the messy diversity of inclusion and mutual honouring that the Holy Spirit represents and seeks to nurture.

So, it's no surprise that when the apostles, newly immersed in and transformed by the Spirit, immediately go out into the streets because they can't keep any of their enthusiasm to themselves, they are confronted by sneering voices accusing them of being drunk on new wine. In a sense they were drunk of course – drunk on the liberating Spirit enthusing and inspiring them. The word 'enthusiasm' literally comes from the idea of being infused by God – 'in-theos-ism' – God-within-ism. And yes, many Churches have severely disapproved of such enthusiasm, because enthusiastic lovers of God who know they are enthusiastically loved by God can't easily be controlled by rules and orders, and they rarely respect the status quo.

And so we have seen the terrifying impact of attempts to destroy diversity and inclusion across the world, with groups seeking power in both secular and religious spheres – and often both at once – to try to make everyone as homogenous as possible, with no room for difference. You either look, act and

believe like us, or you're against us and evil, disgusting, corrupt, dangerous. We see genocide in the world, not even hiding any more under the euphemism of ethnic cleansing. We see fanatical nationalism, pretending to be patriotism, with the narrowest possible definition of what sort of people are permitted to belong, and rampant racism, antisemitism, islamophobia, and transphobia. People are being taught to fear difference, otherness, the strangeness of the stranger. Other people are threats and we should all rightly be afraid of one another, with a fear that will never end, even if all diversity is erased.

This is a vicious circle which permits only one solution – we must all lust for power over others, which is the only solution if we believe that *our* identity alone reflects God's nature and God's purpose for humanity, so that the otherness of others must be erased from the pages of history, and even from the face of the earth.

But the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit shows us the difference between a God of Love versus a God of remote cosmic domination and control. God the Trinity is an eternal and living community - different persons united in love - and the Holy Spirit is given to us to draw us into that community. We are never fully living in the Spirit until we are living in communion with one another. Communion assumes difference, not uniformity, not even agreement, and certainly not conformity to a single idealised culture, ethnicity, or nationality.

Peter's first Holy Spirit sermon reminds us that the Spirit – the living presence of our God of Love – was prophesied, envisioned, and yearned for from long ago, so that people can call on the name of the Lord to save them from cruelty, sin and selfishness in whatever languages they may use. This is the Spirit whose fiery love created and continues to create a true Community of mutual compassion, where only strangers and enemies once stood before.