



Service for Personal or Private Use Sunday 31st May 2020

Happy Birthday!

Yes – that was deliberate. Today is ‘Pentecost’ Sunday, celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit in power on the disciples. It marked the beginning of the Christian Church; so it is our birthday today. Enjoy! Celebrate! After all, “The promise is to you and to your children, to all who are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.” One way or another, you and I are included there somewhere! Hallelujah!

Hymn *Jesus is Lord* (H&P 260, StF 353, MP 367) – refers to the Holy Spirit in v3
Or choose another hymn of worship.

Prayer

O God our Father, we praise you that you have poured out your Holy Spirit, just as the prophets foretold and as Jesus promised. Thank you that you have not left us powerless to serve you, but sent him to inspire us, to direct us and to equip us.

You have given him as the seal upon our discipleship. You have given him to bear witness within our spirit that we have become your children through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. You have sent him to create “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” to which we belong and in which we feel at home. Through him you have blessed us with our different gifts, so that your church is richly blessed as it seeks to serve. The Spirit produces his fruit, so that our lives may display the loveliness of the Lord Jesus in the world he died to save.

We confess that sometimes the river has been allowed to run stale and the fruit has shrivelled on the tree. We have not always listened for his prompting or followed his direction. Instead of being blown along by the wind of the Spirit we have sought false shelter in dull tradition or faded familiarity.

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, who died to save us and was raised from death to bring us new life, forgive us our failure; and as he would pray to you to send us the Spirit, so fulfil that prayer in us. Renew us, refresh us, fill us to overflowing; so that in lives of true worship we may display our Saviour to others. We ask this in his name, and for his sake – Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bible Reading John chapter 20 verses 19-23

The scene is the Upper Room, and the time is the evening of Easter Day. At this point the very idea of Jesus’s resurrection is bewildering. Although they have heard about the empty tomb (and almost certainly seen it for themselves), and have heard that Jesus has been seen by some of the women, and possibly one or two others, it is still baffling. Without warning Jesus appears, though the doors are locked. Never was the customary greeting of “Shalom,” (Peace) more needed. The sight of his wounds was the guarantee that this was really him.

Then, says the writer, “He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” It was an ‘acted parable,’ because the word for ‘breath’ and for ‘Spirit’ is the same. At the start of his ministry Jesus came “in the power of the Spirit,” and now he imparts the same gift to them. This was the sign, and it would be fulfilled not with a gentle breath, but with the sound of a mighty rushing wind on the Day of Pentecost.

The gift was not for self-indulgence or spiritual superiority. As Jesus had died to take away sin and risen to bring new life, so now they were commissioned to take that message of forgiveness, calling people everywhere to repentance and to faith. Archbishop William Temple wrote: 'This is the primary purpose for which the Spirit is given: that we may bear witness to Christ. We must not expect the gift while we ignore the purpose. A Church which ceases to be missionary will not be, and cannot rightly expect to be, 'spiritual'.'

What gift do you need so that you can serve Christ more effectively?

What gift does your church need so that it can serve Christ more effectively?

Will you pray for it?

Hymn *Lord, we believe to us and ours* (H&P 307) or

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind (StF 394, MP 1351)... or some other suitable hymn

Bible Reading Acts chapter 2 verses 1 to 21

I can only guess that the reading was cut short at this point because to continue it to verse 41 – as we ought – would make for a very long reading. This has the unfortunate effect of concentrating on the phenomena of the coming of the Holy Spirit and almost totally overlooking the reason. The important thing was not the spectacular gift, enabling these unlearned folk to speak in unfamiliar languages; the important thing was that they used that gift to tell strangers about Jesus. Without those next twenty verses we may well feel, as some in the crowd did, that “they are filled with new wine.” Let’s look at what Peter had to say in the important part, from verse 22 onwards. His focus was not on the Holy Spirit, but on Jesus. Of course he had had to explain that the Holy Spirit had come, as the prophet Joel had said. But the Spirit’s work is to glorify Jesus, rather than to draw attention to himself. That’s always a good test of whether the Holy Spirit is at work: how much prominence is given to Jesus?

“A man attested to you by God.” Peter begins by briefly describing both the character and the deeds of Jesus. Any fair-minded person considering these would recognize that this was no ordinary man. There was the stamp of God’s approval on Jesus, unlike any one else before or since. When Peter spoke to the Roman soldier Cornelius in Acts 10, he made the same point. “He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” When he wrote his first letter, he said, “He committed no sin, neither was any deceit found in his mouth.” It was a remarkable claim to make, but it was true. Jesus was the man with divine approval.

“This Jesus... you crucified” It’s true that few of those in the crowd had played any active role in the crucifixion, though some must have been in the crowd incited to yell “Crucify” and some must have been among the scoffers surrounding the cross. But in a profound sense we are all guilty. I am a sinner, and he died for the sin of the world. That is why I am numbered among those who crucified Jesus, centuries before I was born. Even though it was “by the hands of lawless (or wicked) men”, it was still because of our sins. Again, we notice how Peter puts it in his first letter: “Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree.” “He suffered, the just on behalf of the unjust, to bring us to God.” (ch 2 v24 and ch 3 v18, if you want to check). There cannot be a message of forgiveness unless the problem of human sin has been dealt with, and Calvary declares it.

“God raised him up.” These three great claims come in consecutive sentences, consecutive verses. They are the key to the Gospel. And the resurrection sets the seal on it all. Notice that Peter devotes more time to the Resurrection than he does to the Cross. There is no carefully worked-out explanation of *how* God forgives, or *how* the death of Jesus secures the pardon of our sins; but the fact itself is not left in doubt. Neither is there explanation of how the Resurrection opens up new life for the believer; but the fact is not left in doubt. David spoke prophetically in Psalm 16. After all, says Peter, we know where David’s tomb is and that David lies in it. So David must have spoken about someone else. Just as the crowd could easily confirm that David’s tomb was occupied, so it was easy to check that the tomb of Jesus was empty, hardly used. It would make an interesting Ad in the ‘Jerusalem Times’ – ‘Tomb available – one careful owner – hardly used.’

There was more to it than just the empty tomb. Of course, if the tomb wasn’t empty there had been no resurrection. But the vital ingredient was the living Jesus and not the empty tomb. This is why Peter moves swiftly towards his conclusion in verse 36.

“God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” He asks them to reconsider their verdict on Jesus. And this time, to reckon with the verdict that God has so clearly given. Was he just an ordinary man? Or was he God’s appointed Saviour? Was he a condemned criminal, or was he “numbered with the transgressors” so that “he bore the sins of many and made intercession for the transgressors”? (Isaiah 53 v12) And if he was God’s anointed, was he also God’s equal, to be given the title of “Lord,” which the Old Testament had reserved for God alone? Peter drives it home. They cannot sit on the fence. They cannot say that this is very interesting and do nothing about it. They cannot water it down to a plea to live a more moral life or to be ‘more religious.’

*When you give an account of your Christian experience, how big a part does Jesus play?
Where do his death and resurrection come into your account?*

Peter has set before them (and us) a Lord worth following and a Saviour worthy of our trust. On this occasion the message struck home. They ask what they must do about all Peter has said. His answer is equally to the point: Repent – that is, if you are serious about this then you need to turn away from your sins, the sins that took Jesus to the cross – and be baptized. Baptism would be evidence of a faith that meant identifying as a follower of Jesus. It would be a sign of being cleansed by God, and of new birth into a new life. That is where the Holy Spirit will come into a life – any life, at any time, in any place. That’s what verse 39 says, and what centuries of Christian faith witness.

What are the evidences of the Holy Spirit’s work in your life?

Has the promise of verse 39 been kept for you?

Read Galatians 5 verses 22-23 slowly and prayerfully. Is the Holy Spirit creating that sort of harvest in your life?

Prayer

Almighty God, who on the day of Pentecost
sent your Holy Spirit on the disciples
with the wind from heaven and with tongues of flame,

filling them with joy and boldness to preach the gospel:
send us out in the power of the same Spirit
to witness to your truth and to draw everyone to the fire of your love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me...

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **love**, that I may bring the love of God and the compassion of Jesus into the lives of others.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **joy**, that I may cheer the spirits of those who struggle with life at present.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **peace**, that I may be a sign of your presence to troubled lives and an assurance of your constant care.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **patience**, trusting that you will keep your promises and fulfil your purposes; keep me from doubting your goodness when I don't see your work as quickly as I want.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **kindness**, to be practical in my expressions of love and care, and to be appreciative of the kindnesses shown by others.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **goodness**, so that my life may demonstrate all your goodness in "the beauty of holiness" and the attractiveness of a disciple's life.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **faithfulness**, that my life may be consistent in following you, and trustful through every circumstance of life.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **gentleness**, as I seek to follow Jesus who was "gentle and lowly in spirit" and who brought hope and strength to those who stumbled or felt their own weakness and failure.

Holy Spirit, create in me the fruit of **self-control**, when I am tempted to 'let rip' or selfishly seek my own way.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me...

Please add your own prayers for people whose needs are known to you; for schools and pupils who may be returning tomorrow; for the medical profession and for care homes; for public transport and for the food-supply chain; for your neighbours, especially those who don't know Jesus; and for your church fellowship.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn *O breath of life, come sweeping through us* (H&P 777, StF 391, MP 488)

If you are using H&P or StF you might like to include a fourth verse from Mission Praise:

Revive us, Lord; is zeal abating while harvest fields are vast and white?

Revive us Lord, the world is waiting – equip your Church to spread the light.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore. Amen.

Readings for next Sunday

Matthew 28 verses 16-20

Psalms 8

Genesis 1 verse 1 to chapter 2 verse 4a

2 Corinthians 13 verses 11-13