

## Pentecost 2024 – ‘The Spirit: the unique ingredient’

**So, today is a special birthday – it’s the birthday of the Church!** Pentecost is important for many reasons – but one of them is that *this* is the day the church starts in earnest. Peter preaches to the crowds in Jerusalem, 3,000 get baptised and suddenly a group of 120 becomes a movement.

Now, we all know that for a proper birthday you need a few things – you need a party, you need candles, and you need presents. And as it happens, in the story of Pentecost from Acts chapter 2, we see all these key things for a birthday: we’ve got the party – it’s the early harvest festival, there are tens of thousands of people gathered in Jerusalem celebrating. They’ve come from all over, some have walked for days to be here. We’ve also got amazing candles – unique ones, because they’re actual people! The disciples received tongues of fire, resting on each of them. Like an amazing supernatural version of those candles that never blow out and keep relighting.

And, of course, the best present of all: the gift of God’s Holy Spirit, poured out on all Jesus’ followers – not just the disciples at the start of the passage, but all those who were baptised as well at the end of the chapter. From this point on, in human history, the Spirit of God doesn’t just come upon a few key individuals, as it did previously, but on *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord.

So, it’s celebration time – and today we remind ourselves of this momentous event. But, it’s also a moment to ask: well, OK, the church is almost 2,000 years old now – that’s quite an age (a lot of candles on the cake). How’s it weathering? Have the years been kind to it?

**And the great tension in the life of the church is between being a radical and dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit, and an organisation run by human beings and governed by rules and regulations.** It is a basic principle of our fallen world that everything tends to decay – and the church is no different, it needs the constant renewing of the Lord’s divine life to prosper and flourish. One of the great gifts and challenges of Pentecost Sunday is that it calls us back to our roots. What are we *really* about?

The Church is a unique entity – when it started at Pentecost, there was nothing else like it. And there’s still nothing like it. It was, and is, a compelling vision of God’s new society, where all were looked after with radical generosity, where lives were transformed. Even as late as 361AD, the Emperor Julian complained, ‘not only do they look after their own poor, they look after ours as well!’

What made the difference then? What makes the difference now? How can we operate as a heavenly community formed by grace and empowered by love? **One fundamental ingredient: the Spirit.** Human love and human effort can only get us so far. We need something more, something which only God can provide. In short, we need the Holy Spirit, that divine life constantly renewing us.

Have you ever seen a fake coin or note? We did once – a £20 note – and took it to the bank. It was a good copy, but not exact – and, crucially, worthless. The risk for the Church is to be like that £20 note: it looks like the real thing, but isn’t. Sadly, too many churches are in the counterfeiting business: trying to manufacture by human effort what only God does by his Spirit. It’s why we need the Spirit of God. It’s why we need Pentecost. And our text for today gives us three tell-tale signs of a church led by the Holy Spirit in *any* age – not just then but now: **Signs, Seekers and Supernatural Gifts.**

**First hallmark – Signs:** it’s an iconic image – the Spirit falling and tongues of fire. And then the capacity to speak other languages. It’s what got everybody’s attention, and gave Peter his platform to speak. I guess the million-dollar question is: is that just for then – what about now? Let’s acknowledge that, in one sense, it *was* a unique event. The gift of actual earthly languages was remarkable – and even a generation later, still in the New Testament period, the gift of tongues changed from other earthly languages to a heavenly one (‘glossa’ to ‘glossolalia’). But I do want to suggest that signs are still integral to a Spirit-filled church. Why? Because, if God is really present in his church, some stuff will happen which only God can do. Some of that will be quiet, peaceful transformation. Other stuff will be more obvious and, dare I say it, miraculous.

I've been privileged to have seen it firsthand, as I'm sure have some of you – and once you've seen it, there's no going back. To those who are sceptical, I would say: 'Everyone has a problem with miracles until they see one.' And once you've seen one, you don't have a problem with miracles anymore. I've seen with my own eyes: a lump on a wrist disappear spontaneously, deafness from birth restored, arthritis in the hand healed and blood circulation improve so rapidly without medical intervention that the person dropped 1.5 shoe sizes in a week – and more, besides. The person who received that latter miracle came to faith immediately – and most of us would, wouldn't we?

All of these things happened with simple, unremarkable prayers. No fanfare, no manipulation – just ordinary people with a mustard seed of faith, and the Holy Spirit abiding in them, asking Jesus to heal someone – and he did. All the glory goes to Jesus. So, this kind of stuff still happens now. It remains a sign that the Spirit is at work in the church.

**Second hallmark – Seekers.** At Pentecost, the Spirit was given primarily to empower mission. Yes, it also empowers the Church to love each other: but the first thing they did was preach the good news to others. So, another mark of a Spirit-filled church is that people are coming to faith, or at the very least, being drawn to the message. It makes sense: nothing attracts people like a good fire. People come to watch it burn.

I sense in our current season a new hunger for God. We hear all this talk about a post-Christian culture, but we get far more visitors to worship than we did before. When so much else in our world and our society *isn't* working, people want to know what does. And we have good news to share! We don't hide the challenges, just as Peter didn't mince his words about the reality of living in his generation. But we do have hope, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans: 'hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.'

The way I describe the necessary organisation of the church is that a fire needs a good fireplace. That is our goal with the human side of church: to create a fireplace which allows the fire to burn at its brightest. The early church appointed gifted people to run the feeding programme, so the apostles could minister the Word. But they *also* kept praying, kept inviting the power of God and people kept coming to faith. The second hallmark of a living Church is Seekers.

**Finally, the third hallmark is Supernatural gifts.** And let's be clear that a divine gifting is not necessarily something obviously 'supernatural', like the gift of tongues or healing. Peter changed immediately as a preacher and teacher. He went from cowardice to courage – he went from foot-in-mouth to sword-in-mouth. What changed? What made the difference? The Holy Spirit.

This is so important: the church needs supernatural gifts as well as natural ones. Of course, natural ones are good as well: but what grows the kingdom is exercise of supernatural gifts. As Paul says elsewhere, 'God makes things grow' – so it is God-empowered gifts that make the difference. I want our church to become a place where people discover, develop and use their grace-gifts, their *charismata*. Alongside the fruit of the Spirit, it is these charismata, these gifts of the Spirit, which distinguish the church from any other human organisation.

And God gives these gifts to all of us. All of the disciples in the passage received them – note that little word 'all' – they were *all* together (v1) and *all* of them received the Spirit (v4). The more of us that are exercising our grace-gifts, the more God is at work, the more the church thrives and the more Jesus is glorified.

So as I wrap up, I have a little catchphrase to remember this Pentecost: desire the fire. **Desire the fire.** The fire which demonstrates the power of Christ at work in his body, the Church. The power which keeps renewing the church in every generation. We need it. I need it. Are you willing to ask for it? Pentecost reminds that the Lord is only to willing to give it. Amen, come Holy Spirit!