**19th May 2103**

**Pentecost**

**John 20.19-23; Acts 2**

Many years ago I went to a church service in a city centre church in Nottingham. The place was heaving and there was a full lively music band pumping out the praise. At the end of the energetic and exhausting service I middle aged woman came over to talk to me. She had the look of someone who had all the answers and wanted to share them with you. She said to me ‘are you renewed?’ I think she had been observing me in the worship and noticed that my hands only went up that far (half way) in comparison to the majority of the congregation who were waving hands around full stretch.

. She was puzzled and disturbed by my response to her question ‘No I’m not renewed, I’m reformed!’ She insisted on praying for me.

We celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit today, the birthday of the church, when fearful, defeated disciples found renewal and new strength and power to go out and change the world and to carry on the work of Jesus. It is that yearly reminder that we go not in our own strength buy in the power of the Spirit. It is a yearly reminder that without Him we can do nothing, the spirit is the life of the church. We all need to constantly be renewed through the Holy Spirit working in us. We all need to constantly be filled with the Spirit.

However as sign of that is not necessarily a lively music band and waving your hands in the air. Those are some of the superficialities of the church life – they don’t necessarily suggest you are spirit filled. Within these two passages are clues of what living a life empowered by the Spirit is truly about.

The search for spirituality is a contemporary quest. Many people in our society would like to describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ rather than as ‘religious’. ‘Religion’ has connotations with rules and authority and duties and conformity, especially to an external authority – how you should lead your life, how you should behave, feel, act – which often leads to a surprising of your true self. The ‘spirit of the age’ is to be authentic, to be your true self, to have no other external; authorities directing your life but to be your own authority, to live life as you choose, drawing on your own inner resources and crucially your own experience.

Now I personally think good Christian spirituality has a bit of both and holds the external and internal, the subjective inner experience, with the external transcendence, something bigger than ourselves, a call on our lives which ultimately gives us meaning and purpose,. That is what I hope we are working with in this church.

This distinction between spirituality and religion is something I am considering looking at for my Masters Dissertation. From the summer onwards for the next year u have to write a 20,000 word thesis as part of Master’s degree of Christian Spirituality and I am thinking of updating a landmark survey done in Kendal, Cumbria, just over ten years ago. (Partly because it is convenient as Debbie and I have just bought a flat up there as a bolt hole and retirement home – if you want to borrow it then talk to us). The Kendal Project saw sociologist of religion use the town as a test case for how British culture and society was changing. They wanted to test the idea that religion, particularly congregational activities like churches, were in decline, whilst those interested in what they described as subjective spirituality – holistic activities, mind body and spirit, stuff from yoga to Tai Chi, etc. was increasing, but also how overall the numbers who were interested in what they described as the sacred dimension of life, or the spiritual’ were declining in Britain. It’s a fascinating and challenging bit of research and obviously has important consequences for us as a ‘religious organisation’.

One thing that came out was that many who went looking for spiritual benefits from the holistic scene did so mainly out of health reasons. They want to feel better; they wanted healing and better health.

Now some of you have tried all sorts before you finally came to faith in Christ and you are living testimony to Jesus words that he can offer us a peace that the world cannot give. I may sound like the woman who knew all the answers in the church in Nottingham now, forgive me, but I cannot deny why I am a Christian and not a practitioner of tai chi or Yoga or whatever. Jesus gives us a peace that the world cannot give.

So in John’s account of the coming of the Holy Spirit, which incidentally is of course different to the account by Luke in Acts of the day of Pentecost. Scholars have debated this – is the giving of the Holy Spirit on the evening of the resurrection a down payment or is it john’s description of Pentecost. Interesting debate – but the reality was that somehow these fearful disciples were changed. If you don’t accept the resurrection of Pentecost, whatever version, you have to concoct some theory as to why they were changed.

These disciples had seen their leader crucified as a criminal and enemy of the state. They had deserted him, fled, defeated, hunted and guilt ridden. When Jesus appeared in front of them they were terrified for so many reasons not least – we thought you were dead and now you have come back to get us for letting you down.

No wonder Jesus first words were ‘Peace be with you’

Peace is such a precious thing. People will do all sorts to try and find some peace in their lives. The Bible is uncompromising in its advice. If you want to find peace – you need to start by making peace with God. God wants to make peace with you – hence Jesus turning up offering peace. The two things our society doesn’t want to talk about are God and death. The two are connected of course. The gospel, the good news is that god loves us – wants us to know peace in our lives. We may feel condemned, or a failure, or full of arrogance that we can do what we want, no need for authorities to conform our lives too – yet deep down the mystery of death always loiters around the corner. Jesus, who came back from the dead – comes back with a message of peace. It transforms life – and transforms our fearful spirits. The disciples were overjoyed – a deep joy (we have started to look on Wednesday at a Life Worth Living’ a course looking at Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which he wrote from prison awaiting his execution – the letter is a sustained meditation on joy, joy in Christ – good number came to it on Wednesday – come and join us).

The peace Jesus gives to us through the Holy Spirit is more than we can ever imagine:

Peace means the cessation of all warfare, but it also means much more.
Peace means a feeling of inner well-being, but it also means much more.
Peace means an end to psychological tensions, but it also means much more.
Peace means halting interpersonal conflicts, but it also means much more.
Peace means the settling of silence on the soul, but it also means much more.

In Valyermo, California, the Benedictines converted a 400-acre ranch into a religious community called St. Andrew's Priory. As you enter the grounds, you find that the land is posted: "No Hunting Except for Peace."

The world is hunting for peace. What will we give it?

Several years ago a submarine was being tested and had to remain submerged for many hours. When it returned to the harbour, the captain was asked, "How did the terrible storm last night affect you?" The officer looked at him in surprise and exclaimed, "Storm? We didn't even know there was one!" The sub had been so far beneath the surface that it had reached the area known to sailors as "the cushion of the sea." Although the ocean may be whipped into huge waves by high winds, the waters below are never stirred.

This, I believe, is a perfect picture of the peace that comes from Christ's Spirit. The waves of worry, of fear, of heartbreak, will affect us. We are human. The disciples were full of fear. Yet at times like that we are encouraged to rest in Christ. Sheltered by His grace and encouraged by His Spirit, the believer is given the perfect tranquillity that only Christ can provide. Hunt for that. That is the personal Pentecost, the Pentecost of peace.

But there is more – the spirit does more work in our lives. Jesus said ‘as the Father sent me, I am sending you’. There is new purpose. Your lives are taken up in something bigger than yourself.

I pity people who lead small lives. Fixated on just doing their house up. Fixated on just supporting their football team. There’s nothing wrong in any of those things – it’s just that life can be so much more fulfilling. Jesus calls us to carry on his work of bringing good news, forgiveness, love, healing, community and reconciliation to a broken world. I perversely love it when people moan to me that they are tired of collecting for Christian Aid, helping to struggle against injustice and poverty, tired of helping out at family café giving hospitality to beleaguered parents, tired of helping to establish a youth centre in the church, running house groups , listening to and praying for other people and their problems. They just want a bit of ‘me time’ : time to sort their house out, do their garden. That’s wonderful – that’s how it should be – rather than the other way round. God bless you in all your work, and may you find time to do the garden and the house and me time - some time!

At the Foodbank Trustees meeting on Thursday I heard how the demand for Dursley’s Foodbank, which we support and host on our premises, is far more than any of the other foodbanks in our area. Will Mansell our Coordinator reckons than 1 in 5 households in the kingshill Ward of dursley has needed help from the Foodbank. There are huge changes going on in welfare benefits at the moment, some very controversial and hard hitting. Newspapers are full of divisive and pejorative headlines looking for people to blame and scapegoat for society’s ills. Niall Cooper from church Action on Poverty writes in Reform the URC’s magazine, how the work of the church is to help society realise we are all interdependent. We all depend on each other, on schools, hospitals, good roads, policing, state pensions. Those who have considerable independence still depend on others for their life and well-being. In a divided society those who are highly dependent also have their own contribution to make to the welfare of the whole.

One of the signs of the Spirit at work is bringing people together – to appreciate our gifts and diversity, to work together in interdependence for the good of all. Look at what happens to this spirit filled community in Acts 2 as a result of the Pentecostal filling of the Spirit. All the believers were together – they had everything in common, they shared their possessions, they met together, they broke bread and ate and sang and praised together.

It’s a good thing to get together. The money we are raising for the Parsonage Project will hopefully further transform our facilities to make them even more accessible and attractive as places for people to get together. But as church we also have a resident community to enable those meetings and get togethers to be positive and grace filled. My dream is that God continues to build a community of hope here. Church can be a positive place of healing and hope.

I read the other day an article from a Christian physician who was writing about how to help people recover from addiction, especially alcohol addiction. . He said from his observations, one of the most powerful influences on his recovering patients is spirituality. He writes how belonging to a church community can replace the drug effect given by alcohol for those feelings of peace, joy, patience. Church community can provide friendships, accomplishments, encouragement and companionship. Dr Martin Doot[[1]](#endnote-1) writes ‘*that there is a personal peace, an inner strength and a resolve to make the next day better that people who know the grace of God can feel. As a Christian physician, I believe that we are each loved by our Lord, who is patient and forgiving. The power of His love can be harnessed within us to overcome illnesses and life problems – even alcoholism’.*

The gift of the Holy Spirit emboldened those scared disciples to speak out about this good news. To not be afraid to be ridiculed – for they were – in Acts the onlookers thought they were crazy. Thought they were indeed drunk – how ironic. In our secular society today, as I said it is taboo to mention God, to talk about faith – and yet I humbly believe that is where our hope lies. No matter how daft or embarrassing it is, may the Spirit embolden us to have the confidence to share good news.

The final aspect of signs of the spirit was how he shows off at times. A bit like divine peek a boo, God is a great mystery. The way he works in the world is a great mystery, but occasionally we are given glimpses of his majesty and his overt, explicit power and grace. Stuff happens. We know in this congregation we have heard personal testimonies of stuff happening. The disciples spoke in tongues – they were filled with awe, there were many wonders and miraculous signs done.

We head on Wednesday night at the Life worth Living Course[[2]](#endnote-2) the story of Kerry Dixon, a friend of Nicky Gumbel who was a missionary out in the Philippines in the 90s. One day he and his team went to speak to an isolated tribe called the T’boli at Lake Sebu. They got there by walking several hours . They took two interpreters with them. Around 8:00 PM word spread that “white people” had appeared. The tribe emerged from the darkness to gather by the light of flaming torches. Kerry spoke about Jesus through the two interpreters to this tribe of people who had never heard of Jesus before. After the talk they pushed a middle-aged man, blind from birth, to them. If Jesus was God, they wanted to see him in action.

 In the hushed silence, Kerry laid hands on the blind man and prayed for Jesus to heal him. He then asked the man if he could see. The man replied through the interpreters that he could see flickering lights through the darkness. Kerry prayed a second time. This time the blind man made out Kerry’s outline in front of him. The third time Kerry prayed, there was no need for any interpretation. The man was jumping for joy and praising the living God who had performed a miracle in his life. All fifty people present that night were converted and a new church began.

The church in T’boli was founded by an extraordinary display of God’s power just as the church in New Testament times was. The church there is still growing. You can Google Kerry Dixon and Philippine church and you can see the work continues – this isn’t made up.

Stuff happens – that’s why we value prayer in this church – why people are available at the end of the service for personal prayer. As William Carey the great missionary once said – ‘expect great things for God: attempt great things for God’

The signs of being spirit filled are not just the inner fruit of the spirit – a growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control – but also outward manifestations of the spirit of God at work – bringing hope, healing, startling events, that the most sceptical just want to pass off as ‘coincidences’ - but for those with the eyes to see- signs of the Spirit at work.

So Jesus has physically cleared off – ascended to heaven and left his disciples to it. What great trust. These fearful disciples thinking they had so badly let their Lord down, and made a mess of things – Here is Jesus not saying ‘you’re fired’ but instead saying ‘you’re hired’.

Erasmus, the famous Renaissance scholar, once told a classic story which was designed to emphasize how important it is that we take up the torch of Christ’s ministry with great commitment. In the story, Jesus returns to heaven after His time on earth. The angels gather around Him to learn what all happened during His days on earth. Jesus tells them of the miracles, His teachings, and His death on the cross, and His resurrection.
When He finishes his story, Michael the Archangel asks Jesus, “But what happens now?” Jesus answers, “I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed me. They will declare my message and express my love. These faithful people will build my church.”
“But,” responds Michael, “What if these people fail? What then is your other plan?” And Jesus answers, “I have no other plan!”

Today is the day we celebrate the birth of the church on Pentecost The good news is, we have not been left alone. The Holy Spirit is here to renew us, reform us, give us peace, give us gifts, bring us together, and make us a community of hope for the entire world. May his work continue to fill us with awe and wonder.

To the glory of God.

1. A DeJong and M Doot, ‘Dying for Drink’ Eeerdmanns, 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. N Guymbel, ‘A Life Worth Living’ , Kingsway, 1999 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)