

Pentecost - empowered by God ...

... to continue the life of Jesus.

A sermon given on Pentecost, 28th May 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

Earlier this morning, at the 9.15 service, we had a double baptism – a father and a son. And it invited me to reflect on the connections between baptism and the day of Pentecost, because it seemed a very appropriate time to celebrate a baptism. The water of baptism speaks not just of cleansing and forgiveness, but it speaks of new life. It's a symbol not just of baptism, but of the Holy Spirit.

And one of the things that struck me as I was reflecting on that is how some of the key stories in the Bible about the Holy Spirit, combine images of water and of breath. So, right at the very beginning, in the book of Genesis, in the story of creation, you have the Spirit of God brooding over the waters of chaos, and that sense that the created universe is drawn out of the waters of chaos and death – that out of great turmoil and negativity, structure and order is produced. Chaos, if you like, is the raw material of creation (something I experience every day!).

Think, for example, of the story of Noah, and the flood – the great flood that comes to devastate the earth because God despairs, it seems, of His creation, and wants to start all over again. So the water comes and destroys all the big things, except for the remnant kept safe in the Ark. And then as the Ark bobs about on the surface of the great flood, Noah sends out a dove which returns with an olive branch in its beak, as a sign that the judgement is over, and new life can begin. And that dove becomes a symbol of the Holy Spirit: a symbol of new beginnings, new life, a new start after the judgement.

Think of the story of the Exodus: Moses leading the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land, and as they find themselves trapped at the Red Sea, God sends a great wind, that blows and parts the waters of the sea, so that the Israelites can get across on dry land. And of course the Egyptian army tries to follow, and the wind stops blowing, and the waters come back, and the army is smothered.

So in all these stories, there is this sense that the water is a symbol of judgement and death, but the wind is a symbol of life and new beginnings. And yet the water is also, of course, the symbol of life. As we see at Jesus' own baptism, when he goes down into the River Jordan, and comes out of the water and the dove comes down from heaven, and the voice saying, "This is my son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased".

So in all these stories, there is this combination of symbols of wind, of breath, of spirit – which in the original languages is all the same word: wind, breath, spirit – but also the imagery of water, both as something powerful and destructive, but also as a sign of new life.

And then, in the Acts of the Apostles reading which we heard this morning about the Day of Pentecost, again we have lots of wind imagery, but this time the wind is being destructive – a great, mighty wind that is like a storm. And here, all the imagery of breath and wind and spirit leads to language – new languages being spoken, helping people from different backgrounds and cultures to understand each other. And without losing their distinctiveness, they become conscious of their unity, their oneness, under God's Spirit.

All of this imagery speaks of the double-sided nature of God's Spirit. On the one hand, there's an element of judgement – of putting something to death, of leaving something behind, of turning away from something. On the other hand, there is the imagery of life: of breath, without which there can be no life; of water, without which there can be no life. That sense of new beginnings, new hope and a new future – but you can't have the new hope and the new future without turning away from the old and the destructive.

So as we celebrate Pentecost today, there is this sense of new beginnings, of the church being empowered by God to continue the life of Jesus. As we heard in the Gospel reading, Jesus breathing on his disciples, saying, receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

Because of the Holy Spirit, there's a continuity between Jesus and his church. The church is sent in the power of the Spirit to continue the work of Jesus. But it can only happen if we're willing to turn away from doing things in our own strength; to turn away from living as if there is no God; to turn away from thinking that we can manage perfectly well on our own, thank you very much. The Spirit implies a close union between God and His people. He requires His people to be open and receptive, willing to receive and to share what they have received.

So on this Day of Pentecost, we pray for a fresh outpouring – again, that watery imagery – outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God and upon the church, in order that we may turn away from the ways of death, of self-sufficiency, of thinking we can manage on our own, of thinking that we have no need of God – and we receive from Jesus his breath, empowering us, sending us out, giving us life after the flood, helping us to be a sign of God's new creation in a needy world.

As we gather at the Lord's table this morning, we come holding out empty hands, receiving not just the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Jesus, but holding out empty hands ready to receive afresh the Holy Spirit, that we may go out as Christ's people, rejoicing in his love,

strengthened by his faithfulness, and knowing that we are called and sent to be his people in the world.

Reading Texts

Acts 2:1-21

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'

¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³ But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.' ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions,

and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,

in those days I will pour out my Spirit;

and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above

and signs on the earth below,

blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness

and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

John 20:19-23

¹⁹ *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'* ²⁰ *After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* ²¹ *Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'* ²² *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'*