

Acts 2 v14-21 – Pentecost – relevant to us today! – 23rd May 2021

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Have you noticed – so often when reading through the Bible you can see that one event or teaching builds up to another and then another and so on? It's probably quite obvious when we think about it; it has certainly been very obvious to me over the last few weeks. You can think of it on a whole-Bible basis – from Genesis to Revelation; from creation through to salvation and eternity and Christ's ultimate and complete victory over evil. That's quite a lot to take in, but you can have the same thoughts of progression on smaller chunks of God's inspired Word.

A few weeks ago we were looking at the Easter story, not just our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His trial and crucifixion, but also His resurrection and ascension, and in the mix of those things we had that very human story of Zacchaeus, who so desperately wanted to see Jesus and was open to turning away from his sinful ways and to doing the Lord's will – such an important portrayal of what our attitude should be – that enthusiasm to meet Jesus and spend time with Him and make a commitment to His ways. And still the train of thought can go on but, just for the moment, let's turn back to that time when Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples and followers – it was just after Cleopas had hurried back from Emmaus to join the others. There they were, and Jesus appeared to them, and after convincing them that it was the real, physical, He – Jesus – whom they saw in front of them, what did He do? He got on with preparing them for the time ahead.

Don't forget, Jesus had already spent perhaps 3 years with at least some of them, teaching them and guiding them and training them, but time was now getting short and He reminded them:

- of the importance of a good scriptural foundation and understanding,
- of the need to tell others about what they had learnt from Him – to be evangelists
- of the need to be His witnesses inasmuch as they had been with Him and seen and heard first-hand His message and His example, but also the need to witness in the sense of living their lives in a way that bears witness to His presence within and their walk with Him every day, and
- of the need to receive the power of the Holy Spirit – and to wait for that special moment to come.

Not long after that they, at least some of the disciples, had been with Jesus when He went out to the Mount of Olives where, after Jesus had reminded them to be His witnesses to the people of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, He was taken up into heaven (Acts 1 v8,9).

Hold all those things in mind, and add to it that the Jewish people had a number of festivals every year. Our Lord's crucifixion had taken place at the Passover festival; just about 7 weeks later came the festival of Pentecost. Pentecost was another *pilgrimage festival* – a festival for which Jews from all over the then-known world would go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to join in that festival. Over the centuries the Jews, the people of Israel, had been systematically scattered over vast areas of the world, re-located by Babylonians and other conquerors to places as far apart as northern India and Turkey and throughout the

Greco / Roman world including Europe and northern Africa; some of course had gone to these foreign parts out of choice – maybe to find work. And despite having been so widely dispersed over the centuries – many never lost their sense of Jewish identity, and every year some would make that pilgrimage to Jerusalem to be there for that festival – and travel was not as easy as it often is today – no jumping in the car or hopping on a plane!

And it was in that context that it happened – with the believers there together in one place, the promised Holy Spirit came upon them. It came upon them there in the middle of that pilgrimage festival, with the city of Jerusalem buzzing with the sounds of people from everywhere imaginable. This was the moment we often regard as the birth of the Church – this was the start of something great and something new; this was the moment when those disciples received the power and courage and guidance they were to need to carry out our Lord’s last instructions to them.

Think for a moment about what happened to those disciples gathered there:

- The sound of a roaring wind filling the house – symbolising perhaps the divine power that would move them to witness for Jesus – Jesus had told them (Luke 24 v49) to wait for the heavenly power of the Holy Spirit
- The flames or tongues of fire – symbolising the purifying power and effect of the Holy Spirit itself – something Isaiah experienced in a very realistic way (Isaiah 6 v6) – where it is recorded that in the year King Uzziah died Isaiah had a vision of God sitting on His throne, and Isaiah comments “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...” and he was fearful for his life – but in his vision one of the seraphim touches his lips with a burning coal and says “your guilt is taken away and your sins atoned for.”
- And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other tongues, enabled by the Holy Spirit Himself. People who heard them were utterly amazed (Acts 2 v7). Here they were, these disciples, able to speak to many different people in their own languages; so many different people able to understand what they were saying as a result of this supernatural ability; but even then, as now, there were people seeing and hearing this who only wanted to ridicule the believers and ridicule the effects of the Holy Spirit. And this speaking in such a multitude of different languages – apart from anything else it symbolises the universality of the Christian message – no longer primarily for the Jewish nation but for all people everywhere, whatever their language, wherever they live – this message was, and is, for one and all. All folk are called to believe, all people are invited to walk life’s path with Jesus at their side and with the Holy Spirit within. And in this passage Luke tells us that the people were amazed – we have an amazing God – the one and only real God – the One who can do amazing things beyond anything that we can imagine.

Presumably the gathered believers moved outdoors, because we next hear of the twelve apostles stepping forwards (yes – 12 – Matthias had just been appointed as an Apostle to replace Judas Iscariot) and Peter speaks to the crowds. After reassuring the people that the believers are not drunk (Jews at that time generally fasted, including from drink, until after the morning time of worship during these festivals) Peter began preaching the first of some thirty sermons that are recorded in Acts. And where did he start – with scripture! What a great example that is to us even today! He made reference back to a

passage in Joel. Joel was one of the so-called minor prophets, living possibly about 750BC, it's probably not a part of scripture we turn to very often; but he prophesied that in the "last days" (the time between Christ's ascension and His return in glory – the "second coming") God's Spirit would be poured out on all people – young and old, men and women, irrespective of social status (Joel 2 v28-32). That was pretty revolutionary even in our Lord's day let alone in the days of Joel, but more importantly, Peter was here following our Lord's example of showing that what was happening there and then was the fulfilment of something predicted so many years earlier in scripture. In just the same way that Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His crucifixion and resurrection were all seen as fulfilment of scripture – so was this outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This had been foretold in scriptures which the listeners already knew, as well as fulfilment of what Jesus had said to His disciples, and that, itself, should give some credibility to what Peter was saying and what they were seeing.

And what does that quote from Joel end with – "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2 v32). Calling on the name of the Lord should not be viewed as just some flippant remark – the promise does not imply salvation where there is no readiness to believe and no readiness to receive the Holy Spirit into one's life. As Peter put it later in that same sermon (Acts 2 v38) "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit..." and then Peter did something that I probably won't – "he continued preaching for a long time", but perhaps I should – about 3,000 people were added to the church that day!

That day was a great day, a pivotal moment in the lives of the believers and a fundamentally important day for us – it was the inauguration of the "last days", the start of the "Messianic Age", the moment of the Church's birth with the fullness of the power of the Holy Spirit, the day the disciples had been waiting for because it had been promised by our Lord Himself. And in a sense it was a God directed way of supernaturally uniting people from so many different places in the world with so many different languages, uniting them through the power and influence of the Holy Spirit, an example, perhaps, of heaven humbly descending to earth to bring unity to the people there in that place. And it was also a great day because there, in one act, God had created the situation in which people could travel back to their homelands taking the gospel with them, helping in that all important spreading of the gospel to all people everywhere.

So what does that mean for us? Is the Holy Spirit still relevant for us today? Peter told the people there in Jerusalem "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit". He then made it very clear (Acts 2 v39), that this promise was not just for the individuals actually there – but was an offer to the following generations as well, not that he was saying it would be inherited, but the promise of the Holy Spirit was simply not limited to his audience – it would be an enduring promise. Call on the name of the Lord, repent of your sins, turn to God, be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins; as Jesus said to Nicodemus – be born again – born of the Spirit (John 3 v1-9) – "Then you will receive the Holy Spirit." It may not be as dramatic as on that day of Pentecost, but if you are walking your life with Jesus – then you will be walking with the Holy Spirit within, because His Holy Spirit is essential for Christian Discipleship, it's just that sometimes we really do need to give Him more space, more freedom, in our lives so that we

really can walk closely with Him and so be better able to be His witness in all that we say and do, so that others will see His light within us.

Do we then need the presence of the Holy Spirit within our lives – individually and as a Church? Yes because:

- There is no Christian life without the life giver – His Spirit
- There is no real understanding without the Spirit of Truth
- There is no real and meaningful fellowship without the unity of the Spirit
- There is no Christlikeness of character without the Fruit of the Spirit
- There is no effective witness without the power of the Spirit
- There is no real and meaningful Church without the presence and moving of the Spirit

Do we need the Holy Spirit in His fullness in our lives – yes, probably more so than ever before. And maybe that means for you, just as it does for me, there is a need for a fuller experience of His Spirit within us, a need for a refilling with the Holy Spirit at this time. There are some familiar words that I am going to share with you, which as I read them as a prayer I invite you to join in as well:

*Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me: Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me.
Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me. Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me.*

*Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on us: Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on us.
Break us, melt us, mould us, fill us. Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on us.*

*Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me: Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me.
Fill me anew. Fill me anew. Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me.*