

**15<sup>th</sup> May 2016**  
**Sermon by Rev Elizabeth Richardson**  
**Pentecost Day C 15-5-16 St Aidan's (and Wesley)**

Many of us today are wearing something red, a symbol of the fire of the Spirit which entered the band of disciples on the day in Jerusalem which we call Pentecost. It is worth noting that Luke, the author of Acts is the only one to write about the Spirit coming at Pentecost. John's gospel has Jesus giving the Spirit to the disciples just hours after the Resurrection when he met with disciples in a locked room. It is not a matter of one being right and another wrong. Each is trying to explain difficult concepts.

Pentecost continues the story as told by Luke, of those early disciples of Jesus after the Resurrection. Clearly something remarkable happened – something they weren't expecting. How was Luke to explain it? There was no actual gale force wind in that room nor was there a fire but the images were the nearest Luke could get to give an idea of the force of the event. So he said it was like a wind and like tongues of fire.

When we read back in the Old Testament stories, we find that wind and fire were used as metaphors for the Spirit of God on a number of occasions. In fact the very word for Spirit was also the word for wind or breath in both Hebrew and Greek. In the very beginning of the world, God breathed to create the first people. The Spirit could be strong or gentle as when the still small voice of God spoke to Elijah. And now, the Spirit brings a complete renewing of the people who were gathered.

Remember the story of the Tower of Babel when the people of God thought that they could be as powerful as god if they built a tower up to the sky. God taught them a lesson by destroying the tower and giving them many different languages so that they couldn't understand each other.

Now, at Pentecost, the followers of Jesus found that they could communicate with many different people. This happened at the start of the church. Yes, they were still all practicing Jews but they were following the teachings of Jesus and eventually they split from the rest of Judaism and became known as Christians.

Think of the gospel reading we've had this morning. The setting is the upper room immediately after the Last Supper and John has Jesus telling the disciples a lengthy summary of his life's message. He makes it clear that the disciples and those that follow will know God if they know him, Jesus. Loving Jesus will mean that we want to do his work and so our lives will be modelled on Jesus. A tall order but God will send his Spirit who will advocate on our behalf when we call on him.

Now those first disciples were afraid of what was in store for them – with some reason. They were ordinary people and not used to public speaking or taking a major leadership role in a risky movement. Being in charge of a

fishing boat was one thing but taking on the leaders of their faith was quite another. But all that changed.

Another amazing thing that happened that Pentecost morning was that the disciple, Peter, who had only a short while before been afraid to speak out now gave a stirring sermon to all gathered around. And these people were not well disposed to hear what he had to say. Some of the crowd had ridiculed the disciples as being drunk even though it was early in the day. It was not a long sermon. Powerful speeches don't have to be long – think of the Gettysburg Address by Lincoln. According to Luke, Peter's sermon was full of imagery: "blood and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood". Now Peter had been given the power to deliver God's message to a large crowd of people from many different neighbouring countries. These people spoke different languages but all understood Peter.

This is what God's Spirit can do. We can all gain the ability to speak of God's message of justice and love – even to a hostile audience.

Some of you will have seen the last episode of Grantchester. There had been a case of a paedophile priest who had been protected by the local archdeacon. The hero, Rev Sidney Chambers, had a curate who was a very shy and insecure man called Leonard. It was he who found the courage and drive to speak to the police and the bishop and then denounce the archdeacon – the man who could make or break his career in the church. Now, that is fiction but it is a good example of the power of the Spirit living in us when we turn to God. The Spirit can empower us to take on many important issues, not only ones that hit the headlines.

The small group of disciples gathered on the day of Pentecost took the Spirit of God into their hearts. They grew in numbers and eventually formed the Christian church and it grew and now has members throughout the world. The Spirit has achieved great things. Sometimes we might doubt the work of the church but every organisation makes mistakes and has members who are not true. Despite the bad press of recent times, the churches are still listened to when it comes to matters of justice – even if the politicians find them annoying.

On Friday at Wesley, we had the memorial service for a long time member, Nev Gare. Nev had been a tireless worker for the environment during his pioneering career in National Parks and related activities. We learnt how he was a thorn in the side of some politicians and industry leaders when he pointed out the ecological consequences of some of their plans. Nev was a faithful Christian and one who loved God's creation. When he saw damage being needlessly done, he said so. Some years ago, already well and truly retired, Nev was promoting the value of this little booklet titled, Bringing back birds. Back in the 1970's there was much concern about dieback in eucalypts especially in the New England area and then more widely. Finally, it was shown that the cause was a lack of small insect eating birds because the understory of shrubs had been removed in so many rural areas and along

roadsides. Small birds need the security of dense shrubs for protection from predators. Without the small birds, lerps and other insects can totally destroy mature eucalypts. Without birds eating insects, food crops are destroyed unless we use damaging poisons. Without the trees, our water resources and soil structures are damaged and so on. And of course, there are other benefits to the ecology of our country when we keep our birds in their habitats. Nev was a great talker and he took the time to do his bit to get that message across. After all, it affects all of us. Surely we can say that the Spirit was working through Nev in his talks.

With Christians like Nev, the church can achieve great things. We can fight for justice and for God's creation and we can spread peace and love towards our fellow humans rather than selfishly working for our own individual wealth or power.

Let us all welcome the Spirit of God into our hearts and minds. Amen.

Elizabeth Richardson