

## Acts 2:1-21 – Pentecost - Sermon for 11am

We are so forgetful as Christians. We claim to follow a living God who is all powerful, all knowing and all caring; and yet we forget this and reduce the action of following to a dutiful Sunday attendance and trying to be good people. We claim to follow the God of all the world who died for every single human being who ever lived; and yet we forget that this means every single one of us, inside and outside the church. We claim to follow a living God of wind and fire, and we turn this following into a load of hot air!

How can we remember, recover or perhaps encounter for the first time, faith in a living, powerful God?

I once sat in a living room with a friend in front of an old open fire with flames flickering over the crackling logs. We were chatting over a personal tragedy I had suffered recently and he offered to pray for me. It was one of those times where you end up asking why God lets bad things happen and I was at a particularly low ebb. We knelt down together and he prayed. I can't remember what he prayed particularly; I suppose it doesn't matter all that much – but what I do remember is hearing the crackle in the fireplace burst to life as a draft gusted down the chimney and fanned the flames. I kept my eyes open as my friend prayed and watched as the fire danced in the breeze and I felt the glowing warmth from the embers. It was clear, God was there; bringing his warmth into my soul and mending the tattered ashes of my heart.

God wasn't in the fireplace. He wasn't even part of the drafty breeze that entered the room. But he was there as my friend prayed, and although I don't have answers to my all questions about why the tragedy happened, I did receive what I needed from God at that moment. I'm not someone who believes that God is actually inside everything but neither am I someone who believes that there is nothing more to this world than what my limited senses can tell me. Instead, that day, I believe the living God was present in a room where flames and wind signified his appearance at a time when I needed him.

This story isn't meant to be my sermon, but it does underline my absolute conviction that our God deals with us directly rather than just leaving us to perform rituals and duties on our own. As Christians, have we forgotten what it means to have a living God and if we have forgotten, no wonder we struggle in our faith. And if any of us aren't yet Christians, no wonder if all that being a Christian means is dreary sermons, old music, and trying to convince ourselves against our better judgement that God exists. But, this isn't the Christianity that I believe in and it's certainly not the Christianity that Jesus's friends cared for either.

Our story, from the book of Acts, today is the story of God, who, having received his son Jesus into heaven following his resurrection from the dead, then pours out his own Spirit upon his followers, empowering them for the mission that Jesus gave them: the mission to go and tell the world about all that God had done for them. Let's look at the story in a bit more detail.

In the first four verses we have a sound of rushing wind filling the whole house and then tongues of fire descending on Jesus's friends. All through the bible, smoke, fire and wind have been signs of God's presence, just as they were when the 10 commandments were given on Mount Sinai thousands of years before. In today's reading, it's a sudden appearance, like the trumpeting of a Herald who announces the presence of royalty. Then all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit – not a separate deity or some sort of magic power or force but God's very own spirit. The effect was

that they began to speak in other languages – not nonsense or some sort of spiritual noise – but instead they spoke in the languages of those who were in Jerusalem at the time, from all over the known world. And they were speaking about all that God has done.

This produces quite a reaction. A crowd gathered containing people who could all understand what these Galileans were saying in their own first language. And just like it would be for us, they ask questions – aren't these the guys from the Jewish backwater of Galilee? If so, how are we hearing them in our own language? Some of them realised that this didn't make much sense and so asked "What does it mean?" Others denied the reality of what they were hearing and tried to simply explain it away and laugh it off as drunkenness.

At this point, the bible shows itself as a great judge of people. Our reactions to the things we see around us are often so pre-programmed. If you'll pardon the illustration, we are like washing machines which once programmed onto a woollen cycle will treat everything as if it were woollen, or once programmed onto a boil wash, will treat everything as cotton, with disastrous results for anything that might shrink! We see what we believe we will see and we filter out or explain away anything else. We all do it, so we can't get too self-righteous about it! But this is why some of the crowd put it down to drunkenness, despite a sudden lucidity and fluency in another language being no symptom of alcoholic intoxication I've ever heard of. Maybe I just don't drink enough!

Perhaps this is how the bible stories of the miraculous power of the living God seem to you? Perhaps it feels juvenile or naïve to believe in these wonders. If so, I'd just ask you to try to genuinely open your mind to the possibility. Jesus's friends were taken by surprise and the crowd were taken by surprise. It's not like they were ancient primitives who just believed that sort of thing because they didn't know better. The very fact a crowd gathered shows that this was unusual and difficult to assimilate into any pre-existing view of the world around them. It was difficult for them, and I know it is difficult for us too, but we can't be so naïve as to think that our technological advancement has freed us from thinking within a worldview and filtering in accordance with it. If anything, our minds are far more closed now than they were back then and so we take genuine wonder and exploration and substitute it with quick dismissal, even if the dismissals don't quite add up.

Some of the confused crowd asked what this meant, recognising the marvel that had occurred and this opened the way for Peter to address the crowd and explain. You can hear Peter's chuckled refusal of the accusation of drunkenness – it's hardly even breakfast time yet! Instead, Peter quotes from the old prophet, Joel, who spoke the words of God hundreds of years earlier. There's loads that can be said about this prophecy. It was originally given to the Israelites at a time of national crisis and promised the salvation of those who looked to God. It heralds an age where God's spirit will be poured out on all who believe. Peter quotes this prophecy, announcing that this age has indeed come. For Peter, we now live in the final epoch of our world when God will fulfil all his promises and his Holy Spirit will be poured out in a new way.

The other night, I watched a TV program about dinosaurs. They are awesome – perhaps the most exciting and intriguing bit of God's creation! It made me appreciate again the vastness of our world through the ages and the huge slices of time and activity that we know so little about, not to mention the huge variety of creatures that have flourished within it. We are used to segregating the history of the world into huge chunks – the Cretaceous, Jurassic, Triassic, and so on – so it's not a huge leap to follow what Peter is saying here; that in this final epoch of our world, this final slice of time, however long it lasts, God has begun to pour out his Holy Spirit and he will continue to do so until the final day when our world finishes and Jesus returns at its completion.

For Peter, this last age is the age of God's Spirit and it is the age of visions, dreams, prophecy and spiritual outpourings for all who believe in Jesus – irrespective of class, age, or gender. There is a vision of signs in heaven and on earth which relate to the blood, fire and mist of Jesus's death, his resurrection, and his ascension and then also today's story of Pentecost itself. In the prophecy there's also signs in the sky of the end of the age. We live between these times, in the age of God's Spirit; in an age where God has chosen to intervene in his world in a new and exciting way and in an age where God will fulfil his promises and rescue his people.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For Joel, the Lord is Yahweh, the Holy name of God. For Peter, the Lord is Kurios, the master, Jesus. Jesus is Lord, Son of God, sitting at God the Father's side in heaven; reigning with God and pouring out God's Spirit on his world. It's a huge scene - a scene of divine power, and triumph. A scene of God's power being shared with mortals. Not for them to have and hoard. Not for them to profit from. Not for them to crusade about. But for everyone who believes in Jesus, God's spirit is given to enable us in God's mission for the world – the mission to take God into the whole world and tell everyone what God has done for us.

For Jesus's friends, the spirit gave them linguistic ability to share God's story. Later, God's spirit produced healings and resurrections and inspired his followers with the right words at the right time. All through history, God's Spirit has worked in miraculous ways, and it still works today. The God of wind and fire has not been quenched or burned out. The living God has not become aged and frail. Instead, God waits for us to allow him to fill us with his Spirit for our own part in his mission.

As Christians, we believe that God is present with us in his Spirit. We believe that Jesus has died and risen and now reigns in heaven so we can be united with God and his Spirit can rest on us. We believe that God has done great things for us and that this great news is something we cannot bottle up or try to keep quiet.

God isn't dead. God isn't quiet. God isn't benign. We serve a living God, whose love for us flames brightly in this final epoch of our world and who calls us to serve him in preparing the world for its completion and who equips us with his own Spirit so that we are never alone, never quenched, never dulled. We announce the coming of God's Kingdom as servants who go ahead of their master, and we look forward to it with hearts that sing of the goodness of our God and the greatness of his works. Amen.