

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 31st May 2020 – “The day of Pentecost”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day on which we mark the gift of the Holy Spirit to God’s people which, in turn, brought the Church that worships Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, into existence.

Pentecost is, therefore, a very special day in the life of the Church and it seems strange – as it did when we celebrated Easter this year – that we are not able to be in our own church buildings lifting the rafters in Pentecost praise.

More and more, however, I think many of us are beginning to see these days of lockdown and concern as teaching us a new and very profound lesson about what the Church of Jesus Christ is all about. We are finding new ways to connect with each other... and new ways of reaching out. Come that day when we are able to worship together again, we will not forget, I suspect, what it was like to be together in this very different way.

And that is what Pentecost is all about... the day that, through the power of the Holy Spirit – God brought his people together in the most dramatic and powerful manner as God’s Spirit poured through Jerusalem in a rush of wind and with tongues of fire.

We’ll come to more of that in a moment, however. First of all, though, shall we pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

Holy Spirit... the Spirit of God... at the dawn of creation when the earth was without shape... where molecules and matter battered against each other to create form... where darkness filled both the day and the night and where vast expanses of emptiness dominated – there at the beginning you were... and through you what was not became what now is – we worship you...

Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God – the one promised to the disciples by our Saviour Jesus Christ... the one who would take their confusion and their sadness and somehow turn it into a moment dawning realisation of your power... the one who would be their friend and the one who makes them no longer servants but friends – we praise you...

Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God... on the day your church was born you came as tongues of fire burning through the hearts of your followers... as wind rushing through the stubborn cobwebs of their minds bringing clarity and focus... coming as power from on high to bring to life their questions and turning them into a real and vibrant faith – we adore you...

Holy Spirit, on this day on which we remember that day of new life... the day of Pentecost when the promise of Jesus that assured us that you would be with us always was fulfilled, forgive us for

allowing our faith to falter... to become shapeless... below par. Instead give to us the inspiration and renewal of your Holy Spirit as we worship you this day...

And hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the words of the one whose very Spirit fills our lives – Jesus Christ our Lord as we say:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading – Acts chapter 2 verses 1 to 21

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’

13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine.’

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

17 “In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

18 *Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*

19 *I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.*

20 *The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.*

21 *And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

The American Episcopal priest, Janet Hunt, recounts the moving story of an Iraqi woman by the name of Aseel Albanna who happened, around thirty years ago, to arrive in the United States for a visit that was only supposed to last for four weeks. However, almost as soon as she arrived in the States war broke out and it was unsafe for her to return. Somehow, with the help of her family back home, she found a way to stay on in the states as a student. So, it was (recounts Janet Hunt) that Aseel Albanna spent literally years away from home, settling for a long while in this new and unfamiliar land. As the years passed, however, Aseel saw little reason for returning home until, for personal reasons she had to. Upon arrival in Baghdad she was driven through the streets that she remembered from her childhood. Over and over and over again, however, she kept on saying how much it had all changed. All the landmarks of her childhood had been destroyed... the familiarity of the past had disappeared in the rubble lined streets. When she finally got out of the car and stood in front of the house which had once been her home, this is what she said:

"It's like there's no more life left in it. What I have left is only memories, because right now I barely recognise it, to be honest. The only thing that's still here is the breeze - that Baghdad breeze."
(Janet Hunt, <http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2012/05/baghdad-breeze-and-power-of-holy-spirit.html>)

That's a very potent image – isn't it? Imagine having been away from a place for so long that when you return to it again that even although the sights and sounds around you have changed that you can still remember a place because of something as profoundly basic as the breeze that blows through it...

That's the sort of memory, I suppose, that would stick in your mind from childhood... those who grew up on farms can probably still evoke the smells of the farmyard, even now... and those who lived in our own community here of Cockenzie and Port Seton will probably also be able to tell of

not only the sights of the harbours but the smells too – the smells brought in by the fishing boats laden with herring and prawns...

Sights and sounds change. Sometimes the simplest of things, though, can bring them all back – a smell... even a gusty breeze...

Of course, the whole point of Janet Hunt recounting that story of Aseel Albanna was to highlight the significance of the rushing wind that sits at the heart of the Pentecost story that we read just a few moments ago.

Those who were there in Jerusalem that day would never forget, surely, the sound of the rushing wind... nor the roar of the tongues of fire as they lashed out at the unsuspecting people...

Here was an event that was so momentous and unusual that they might, one day, forget the general scene around them... they might even forget the details of the occasion, but they would never forget the way in which the Holy Spirit entered their lives in such an amazing way.

Nor would they forget just how much change it brought to them. Their lives would never be the same again.

To understand what had changed in them we've got to back pedal in the story just a little bit, to the passage we read last week as we considered the Ascension of Jesus to be with his heavenly Father in Acts chapter 1.

Between the events of the Resurrection and Pentecost Sunday the disciples had simply hunkered down, as it were, in Jerusalem. This was in line with what Jesus himself had asked them to do at verse 4 of Acts chapter 1 where Jesus simply says, *"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised"*

Although the disciples do as they are told, we can only imagine that the words of Jesus had left them all a bit confused and muddled.

What sort of gift was Jesus speaking about here? Jesus has spoken about a helper... a guide – but what does that really mean?

Would that gift arrive in a parcel?

Would it take the form of a letter or a message passed on by another?

The last thing they would have had in mind was what actually did happen...

And so, they just stay put and, to be fair to them, they even spend a lot of time together. They prayed... they discussed the story of Jesus... they even replaced the lost disciple – Judas – with a man called Matthias...

So, everything was back in some semblance of order, but the days were still long - made worse by the fact that Jesus had told them to do nothing until this so called "gift" was given to them...

As we all know from these day's we are journeying through, waiting is not always the easiest thing to do, especially if you are used to always being out and about.

After all, many of the disciples were hard working men used to the physical demands of work. It's hard to imagine someone like the brash disciple Simon Peter, for example, taking the order to just stay put all that agreeably...

Indeed, waiting around can lead to stagnation. Waiting around has caused more than a few folks to simply nod off to sleep... Waiting is a tiring old business... as tiring, if not more so, than the demands of daily duties.

It is, however, just at the point when they are about to collectively “*nod off*” to sleep that God shakes the foundations of their lives.

As one commentator, Stan Mast, puts it - the breath of God exhaled so loudly and so profoundly that it literally blew the doors off the houses they were staying in, an act of God which, says Mast, might be worth asking God to do again for his Church in this day and age.

Let me share with you what he writes: *“The church today needs to have its doors blown off by the wind of God. I do, and so do many of you. We don’t need more knowledge; at least most of us don’t. We know Jesus and we know a lot about him. We don’t need a greater sense of duty; we know what we’re supposed to do. We even want to do it, at least in our better moments. What we need is power, the power only God’s Spirit can give, the power to speak the name of Jesus out in the world. Only the wind of God can turn a neat, tidy, devoted band of genuine disciples who love Christ’s church into a dynamic, bubbling, Gospel-sharing church that loves the world as God does”* (Stan Mast, [https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/pentecost-a/?type=old testament lectionary](https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/pentecost-a/?type=old%20testament%20lectionary))

And perhaps... just maybe that’s what God might even be doing for his Church in these days when it’s not so much a case of the doors of the Church being blown off that is the case but rather the doors of the church being bolted shut!

God’s not so much blown the doors off our buildings as set us out on the task to find purpose and life within our faith communities... to find ways of making sure that when those doors open again that we won’t take for granted, in the way we sometimes did, that the building was the focal point of our worshipping community. Instead, the locked doors have allowed us to see the people of God as the focal point of our faith and, in that sense, God has actually sort of blown the doors of the church off their hinges. It’s a breeze that God blows that we will never forget.

The other thing that the Holy Spirit does in our story, of course, is to bring greater understanding amongst the people of God for when the Spirit blows through their very pores it causes them to speak in languages and tongues that they never even knew they knew...

God has turbo charged their knowledge of language and communication in a way that people who hitherto didn’t really know each other now did.

Just as we go on our daily walks these days, or our route march around the supermarket observing the one way systems, we kind of know what’s going on in our fellow walkers or shoppers mind... joined in a common purpose... a purpose that has led to more than one unexpected conversation.

It seems that God’s Holy Spirit has blown those doors off again...!

As Aseel Albanna testified to, you can be away from Baghdad for years... you can forget all the sights and sounds that have been turned in to rubble, but you’ll never forget the Bagdad breeze.

And as the disciples discovered all those years ago, you can be on the verge of nodding off to sleep... lazing around the proverbial waiting room for that gift to arrive but they would never forget the day God’s breeze blew the doors off and, if God is really doing the same in our own times, neither will we.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Ever living and ever-loving God, we praise you for your loving presence with us.

Lord, we are never closer to you than when your Holy Spirit dwells within our lives for their it turns our preconceptions upside down... helps us to see the world in a new light... bring hope out of concern and love that we experience in these days.

On the day of Pentecost when we remember how you brought new life and hope to your people, we pray for the needs of the world in which we live.

And so, we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit, take and transform our society — that broken people will find healing; that lonely people will find love; that bitter people will find peace; that fearful people will find hope.

Come, Holy Spirit, take our world's leaders and governments and bring renewal – that in these days of global concern those who lead us would set aside differences... that bonds of togetherness would bring together disparate nations around the earth so that the poor, those in need and those who are vulnerable will find the protection that they need..

Come, Holy Spirit, fill your church— that our worship, even in these changed days, will be ever more pleasing to you; that through a spirit filled wisdom our lives will come to make a real difference to real people in an all too real world.

Come Holy Spirit, hold close to you those who need you at this time – the lonely... the lost... the ill... the bereaved. Be with those who day by day carry the burdens of caring for the sick. Be with all those who care for others in their time of need and make your presence known to all who need it as we bring our concerns for others to you.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill our lives with your presence - so that more and more every day, all that we do and say and hope will be an act of worship to you and an expression of love to others, to the glory of your name and in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Benediction

Let us reach out to God's world filled with the spark of the Holy Spirit.

Let love guide our actions.

May we listen for the Spirit of Truth.

Let us spread the peace of Christ.

And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – bless and be with you this day and forevermore, Amen.