

Sermon – Sunday, May 23, 2021 – Pentecost – St James

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the wrap up of the Easter season. At Christmas we say ‘Merry Christmas’, Christ is with us. At Easter, ‘Christ is Risen’ Christ is for us. At Pentecost, what could we say? ‘The Spirit Rushes In’? Christ is in us. Some churches have red balloons or red and orange streamers to represent the fire like tongues. Maybe we could bring out the fans to produce some wind. Some call Pentecost the ‘birthday of the church’ and have a cake – maybe not 2000 candles, although all that fire would be impressive. This morning we are going to look at two hymns to help us grasp what Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit means for us. There are two accounts of Pentecost. There is the gentle breeze in John as Jesus breathes onto the disciples fearfully gathered the night of his resurrection. Then there is the violent Pentecost wind described in Acts where the Holy Spirit appears as tongues of fire to over a 100 people. The disciples who receive Christ’s breath are commissioned to take the Spirit out into the world. The ministry of the violent wind is to seek and fan the Spirit already present in the world. As disciples, we are challenged in both Pentecost stories. Both the gentle breeze and the violent wind call us to find that Holy Spirit within and in others and to take it out of the churches into the world.

The first hymn we will consider is called ‘Thou Who Camest From Above’. A friend and colleague mentioned it this week as I began to grapple with the scriptures. I was not familiar with this hymn but my interest was piqued when he said it was sung when he was ordained a priest 41 years ago at Christ Church Cathedral!!! Can you imagine? 41 years a priest....He is still moved by this hymn and it remains his prayer.

It was written by Charles Wesley the great reformer of the Church of England whose followers became known as Methodists. The early Methodist Conferences were about the work of God, not the work of man for God! The flame of faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This hymn prays for the gift of an inner holy flame of love. This is a gift bestowed by the Spirit to enable the one who receives it to work and speak and think for our Lord. In other words, the gift enables the receiver to become an instrument of our Lord Christ. Watch in the second verse for the word

‘inextinguishable’ blaze. Some have tried to re-word this because they thought the 6 syllable ‘inextinguishable’ just too much for singers to manage. But the original seems to have survived. Let’s listen and watch. This is Rochester Cathedral.

<https://youtu.be/R3UYybc7Xa0>

O Thou Who camest from above,
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart.
There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.
Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
To work and speak and think for Thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up Thy gift in me.
Ready for all Thy perfect will,
My acts of faith and love repeat,
'Til death Thy endless mercies seal,
And make my sacrifice complete.

How did you like the frilly collars?

The second hymn is one you may know, one of my favourites! 'I Feel the Winds of God Today'. This is an old English/Irish traditional melody. It uses the image of each of us on a sailing boat tossed and drenched with spray and torn with many a rift...we lift our sails to be caught by the Holy Wind, to be enabled, to be carried along, to be empowered to 'brave another cruise'. In this hymn the Spirit comforts, dries our tears and also its 'freshening breeze' moves us to leave what's easy and put back to sea. It is a message of courage! The Spirit is our pilot, showing us the way, inspiring us to lift our sails remembering we are not alone, we are propelled through the deep.

Let's listen.

<https://youtu.be/GZiG4fEv0io>

1 I feel the winds of God today;
today my sail I lift,
though heavy oft with drenching spray
and torn with many a rift;
if hope but light the water's crest,
and Christ my bark will use,
I'll seek the seas at his behest,
and brave another cruise.

2 It is the wind of God that dries
my vain regretful tears,
until with braver thoughts shall rise
the purer, brighter years;
if cast on shores of selfish ease
or pleasure I should be,
O let me feel your freshening breeze,
and I'll put back to sea.

3 If ever I forget your love

and how that love was shown,
lift high the blood-red flag above;
it bears your name alone.

Great pilot of my onward way,
you will not let me drift;
I feel the winds of God today,
today my sail I lift.

How many times have we gone through tough situations: illness, death, abuse, loss of job, divorce and survived in one piece. We know our survival is something of a miracle, that we're really not that tough; that it was only the Grace and Power of the Spirit that kept us intact and effective as instruments of God. How many times have we suddenly had an idea to do something?

How many times have we had an insight 'out of the blue'? How many times has someone connected with us when we most needed it? Well it wasn't really 'out of the blue', was it; it was the Spirit's whisper that we heard. Some of you may have sensed a special presence during worship. That is the Spirit.

In an article in Decision magazine (July, 2002), Tony Evans tells of rushing to catch a plane. He was walking as fast as he could -- really straining to get

to the plane on time. Then he glanced over his shoulder and saw a man walking at a much easier pace -- but moving much faster.

The other man was on a moving sidewalk. Evans comments:

"When we walk in the Spirit, the Spirit comes underneath us and bears us along. We're still walking, but we walk dependent on the Spirit."

When we walk by our power, we move at one pace.

When we walk by God's power, it is an altogether different pace.

When we remember to 'lift our sails' to the great Holy Wind that can be as powerful as a tornado and as gentle as a baby's breath...we will be all right.

So let us all accept the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit we are offered. Let us pray for the flame of sacred love to be kindled in our hearts. Let us lift our sails to catch that wind which will wipe away our tears, pilot us through and beckon us on to unexplored horizons. Amen.