

Spirit Running Wild – Acts 1: 1-21
A Sermon for Pentecost Sunday 31/05/2020 by Rev Phil Wootton

I wonder what it was like, gathered in that upper room in Jerusalem – if we can still imagine gathering in one place. There were probably about 20 there (11 disciples, plus Matthias; Jesus' brothers, perhaps 3 of them; and an unspecified number of women, including Jesus' mother). Were they expectant, or fearful? Were they straining at the leash, or were they patient and calm? What did they expect by Jesus' promised 'helper' – person or power? We do know they were praying, and prayer can unleash a mighty force!

I wonder what it was what like, when Pentecost came. They could hardly describe it. They reported a sound like the roaring of the wind ... but it wasn't really the wind. They saw something like tongues of fire ... but it wasn't really fire. They felt ... what did they feel? They discovered they were all talking at once ... not their own words, but somehow making sense. Then, all of a sudden, they found themselves outside. This was a force that could not be contained.

I wonder what it was like on the streets in Jerusalem that day – if we can still imagine being amongst festival crowds – so many people packed into narrow alleys, a happy chattering in dozens of languages. Suddenly, something's going on. Can you hear it? Can you see? Can we get any nearer? How long does it take to register everyone there can understand what's said, as if in their own mother tongue? These words cannot be stifled.

I wonder what it is was like addressing that crowd – not stopping to think; no time to plan and prepare; no advisors to advise. You're responsible for the public messaging of one of the biggest events in history? How do you contextualise, interpret, find the right Bible quote, and demand a public response? By the end of Peter's speech, 3000 believed and were baptised. The message has taken a life of its own: it's gone wild!

'The Wild Goose': that was the name Celtic monks of the fifth and sixth centuries gave to the 'Holy Spirit'. They recognised the free-range nature of the Spirit. They knew Jesus' words in John 3: 8 that the Spirit is like the wind that blows where it wills. They themselves were legendary for getting in their coracles and floating wherever the wind/Spirit blew them. They knew the Spirit cannot be bent to human wants or desires, plans or intentions; cannot be domesticated to fit what we consider to be our needs. 'Wild Goose' is a very apt name. The Spirit flies free, as on the day of Pentecost, so through history, for those who are willing to trust.

Incidentally, we can get confused over pronouns for the Spirit: traditionally an 'it', the Spirit is as personal as Father or Son, so better to say 'he'; but in Hebrew the word is feminine, so why not 'she'? I think we should be happy with such 'gender fluidity': it's another sign – the Spirit runs wild.

In her sermon last week, Joy encouraged us to think of our time of enforced lockdown as comparable with the period the disciples spent between Ascension and Pentecost in waiting, gaining refreshment and renewal in prayer. Pentecost points to the end of lockdown. We can't organise the timing when it will actually happen, but let's try to be ready as it were to hit the streets again, with the Spirit's strength and direction. Even though there are too many uncertainties for detailed planning, I believe the Spirit is pointing us to think beyond 'getting back to normal'. The Spirit's nature is to invite us into 'a new thing', God's thing, and to join in – even if it seems a bit wild for us! If we can't exactly plan, we should at least be asking questions – otherwise what is merely expedient and cost effective will be what decides – and we'll miss the chance to go wild with the Spirit!

We might begin by thinking about the experience of lockdown and asking what we want to keep after it's ended. For me, it's probably the daily walk, the appreciation of nature, the sound of birdsong. As an individual, there should be nothing to stop me walking – although it may be less attractive when the weather breaks and the traffic returns. As a society we need to ask how we can keep the clean air and the quiet we've enjoyed, whilst work, education and leisure resume. As a church, can we make sure our restart is marked by renewed focus on care for the environment – and maybe enjoy outdoor services or activities alongside? In the meantime, can we share with The Wildlife Trust which invites us to spend June as "30 Days to Go Wild!" suggesting a daily set of "Random Acts of Wildness." I have yet to discover what these are, but they will involve caring for creation in one way or another. Here's a chance to go wild with the Holy Spirit!

Many people have commented on the lockdown period as one of community spirit and good neighbourliness. Of course this is not universal, but can we keep practising it now in order to set the tone for 'normal' times? As a church, we have learnt the value of regular phone contact, caring for one another, and holding us together in unity. Can we look to continue and develop this further? As individuals, have we got any better in knowing and noticing our neighbours? And more broadly, how can we fulfil the longing to be a more compassionate and caring society, showing we appreciate those who provide what's truly vital, including through better pay and conditions?

On the Biblical Day of Pentecost, the Spirit inspired the apostles to go wild with the message of Christ. How is the Spirit calling us today to overflow with this good news? Across the country, it's been widely remarked how many people are engaging with acts of worship on the internet, hearing the Gospel, joining in prayer, and connecting with the church. We don't know yet how this will work out in the longer term. But can we be ready to move with the Spirit, share the good news with confidence, and find new ways in our times to let the message run wild?

Pentecost reminds us that, though the doors may be locked for many days, they will burst open. Although we may feel weak, we have a power within – a power that's sufficient for us (even us) to run wild and change the face of the earth! Are we ready for some wild thinking? Are we ready for the Power to be unleashed?