

Spirit and Salvation – Acts 2: 1-21 & John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15
Sermon for Pentecost Sunday 23 May 2021 by Rev Phil Wootton

Pentecost was an eruption – an eruption of God on earth. It was felt as a howling gale, blowing open doors and windows. It was seen as tongues of fire, splitting up and licking at heads of hair. It was experienced like laughing gas in the lungs, loosening tongues and releasing unknown words. No wonder they ran outside, bursting onto the streets and causing consternation amongst the crowds. Something extraordinary was happening. It was a day of prophecies, visions and dreams, and the outcome? – that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

In some quarters (although I've not noticed it in Tettenhall Wood or Castlecroft) the release of many lockdown restrictions has brought crowds onto the streets. The long-enforced imprisonment behind our own four walls has, in stages, been coming to an end. Is this our salvation? Is 'salvation' a path back to what was previously 'normal'? Or is there a 'new thing' that is beginning to dawn? Are we, whether young or old, able to dream again, or can we only envision nightmare scenarios? Some of us are so weary that we recognise anything like this requires a new eruption of God among us.

When Peter tried to explain what was going on, he found himself quoting the prophet Joel, who had lived some 800 years earlier. Joel promised a day of salvation – as dramatic as if the sun had turned black and the moon to the colour of blood – when God would pour out his Holy Spirit on everyone and not just the select few. In Joel's day, the immediate problem they needed saving from was infestation by locusts: all their crops had been destroyed by chomping insects; for years, they'd had no worthwhile harvest. But now, God proclaims through Joel, you will pull through; it will come to an end; you will get enough to eat; and more than that, I will pour out my Spirit on you all. You will be saved.

Jesus saved different people according to their individual need. He healed those suffering from leprosy, saving them from social exclusion. He healed a blind beggar, and saved him from a life on the streets. He healed a woman haemorrhaging blood and saved her from shame. He called Zacchaeus down from the sycamore tree, and saved him from a life of constant acquisition. When Jesus saved people, it was a multi-faceted salvation – body, mind, spirit; personal, social, economic; in this world and for the world to come. But the common ground in all these was that Jesus himself was at the centre. It was his presence, his words, his action, that changed everything. The Holy Spirit comes to do exactly the same – to be Jesus with that person, in that situation. And the Spirit, having no body, looks for people to be the hands and feet, the eyes, ears and mouth, through which to work... so that, all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Right now, we may think of our 'salvation' as having got through pandemic. And we do give very genuine thanks for all enabling this. And we do also look forward to future salvation for eternal life in heaven with God. But what about the medium term? What's the Spirit's call to us at this moment on earth? What are our visions and dreams to be involved in God's salvation right now?

Jesus gave some guidance to prepare his disciples for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, he says, will be your Counsellor or Advocate – like someone who will stand by you in court, and speak up on your behalf. However, as you read the verses around, you find this ‘Advocate’ has more roles than we’d expect from a lawyer in court today. He multi-tasks.

First, this Spirit-Advocate testifies. He doesn’t just interrogate witnesses. He bears witness himself – witness to Jesus. How does this work? It may be the little prompt inside – whether conscience, or connection when something makes sense, or possibility of what you can do. Or it might be when something clicks in someone else, or a situation, that effectively we’d written off. Spirit hints, Jesus is in action here.

Second, this Spirit-Advocate leads us into the truth. Nobody can get at the whole truth, certainly not all at once: it is a process. How do our lives stack up – our thoughts, opinions, priorities – when we ask Jesus what he thinks? Gradually, we discern Jesus’ truth at the heart of everything.

Thirdly, this Spirit-Advocate asks questions – awkward questions; questions that will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgement. Why do you not turn to Jesus, whose love is at the heart of everything? Why do you tolerate injustice in the world, and wreck your own planet while you’re about it? Why do you try to keep in with the powerful, who already stand condemned by God? The word ‘Advocate’ is sometimes translated ‘Comforter’ but the questions he asks can be profoundly discomfiting. He asks the world first, but his questions have a nasty habit of turning around and challenging ourselves.

So, where is the Spirit convicting us today? And where is the Spirit encouraging us to see visions and dream dreams (young and old alike)? I was challenged, as I thought of disciples blown out into the streets, why I spend so much time trying to get things right in church? The answer must be that in church we proclaim Christ’s glory in such ways as we are equipped and inspired to tell and show the love of Christ outside. But do we?

Many are dreaming at the moment of coming back to renew society; that the pandemic has brought to the surface all sorts of inequalities, injustices, exclusions and marginalisations which are not acceptable. Somewhere in all this quest for change Christ’s church has a role to play, because, surely, that’s where God’s Spirit is at work today. How do we testify to Christ in our situation? How do we offer God’s salvation in our community? Where is the Spirit blowing now? Do we dare pray for a fresh eruption from God? At the very least I think, we can pray for, and pray to be, a breath of fresh air.