

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2018

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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**HYMNS:**    **378**    **“Father of everlasting grace”**  
              **369**    **“Baptise us with your Spirit”**  
              **548**    **“Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine”**  
              **94**     **“To God be the glory, great things he has done.”**

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**READINGS:** Acts 2:1-21  
                  John 15:26-27 & 16: 4b-15

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***“THE GUIDING PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT”***

Some Sundays provide the preacher with a challenge – the readings are obscure and there are no obvious topical references with which to ground the message. That is definitely not the case today – today we have an embarrassment of riches, so much to say about the Bible readings, so many things going on in and around the service – a baptism, confirmation and reception of new members, not to mention the Circle the City Walk for Christian Aid in which some of our members will participate .

We have our wonderful choir from the USA enhancing the service with their singing. And if that were not enough, we had a very eventful day yesterday – it was the FA Cup Final at Wembley, you know and the ‘wrong’ team won! And there was something going in Windsor – a certain wedding.

All of that before I even mention that today is Pentecost – the commemoration of the coming of the Holy Spirit in all its power on those first Christians gathered in Jerusalem. For Methodists this is also the day when we remember the heart-warming experience of Charles Wesley at Pentecost 1738 and look forward to his brother John’s parallel experience in a few days’ time

Today is Aldersgate Sunday – named after the street, not ten minutes away from here – where John and Charles experienced their spirit-filled transformation.

Sometimes people describe Pentecost as the reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel. There, at Babel, God scattered his people for their pride and created a situation where they could not understand each other’s languages. At Pentecost people heard God speaking through the Spirit and everyone understood. Differences in human language were no longer a barrier.

Perhaps we could describe what happened yesterday in Windsor as a sort of reversal in its own right. Just two years before this Chapel opened the residents of the North American colonies decided they had had enough of royal rule. They dumped tea in Boston harbour and made it clear that George III, his redcoats, his taxes and all his doings were no longer welcome. The War of Independence ensued. Yet yesterday those and links with the old country and with the British Royal family

were renewed, and a citizen of the USA joined 'The Firm' in the person of Meghan Markle. Pentecost was the day when the impossible became possible. Is it only a matter of time before a more comprehensive reversal of 1776 becomes possible, too – and Queen Elizabeth is invited to come back and replace the current inhabitant of the White House?

Enough of this frivolity – let us get back to our readings for today.

From the Gospel of John we have Jesus speaking to his disciples and promising them the presence of the Holy Spirit – a Spirit of truth to guide the disciples and give them power and direction. In our reading from Acts we have the well-known and very graphic description of the happenings on that first day of Pentecost. The language of this passage is over the top, hyperbolic, full of images. The disciples were sitting quietly then, all heaven broke loose in such a dramatic experience that Luke, the writer of Acts, struggled to find words to describe it – a sound from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, tongues, as of fire that rested on the heads of each person present and a new power in each of them, giving them ability to speak persuasively and be understood by people of different languages.

The noise of this experience spilled out into the neighbourhood and people came to see what on earth was going on. People were gathered in Jerusalem for a festival. They had come from all around the Mediterranean world – we heard that long list of places. But then another miracle – all of these people could understand what the disciples were saying – even though the disciples were from the rural backwater of Galilee. Everyone gathered there could understand that God was speaking to them through these disciples – it was so amazing, so amazing that some accused the disciples of being drunk.

It fell to Peter to explain to people what all this meant – he quoted from the Old Testament prophet, Joel, 'In the last days it will be,' God declares, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.'

This was not a new spirit. This was the same spirit that is recorded in Genesis as the Spirit broods over the chaos of the waters – bringing new dimensions of life into being.

That same spirit inspired and directed the prophets of the Old Testament. That same spirit appeared to Jesus as he was baptised by John in the Jordan with the message, 'this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.'

This same spirit has inspired and re-invigorated the Christian faith through ordinary people throughout history, through nuns such as Julian of Norwich and monks such as Martin Luther and by means of ordinary Christians living out their faith day by day whose names have not come down to us.

That same spirit brought new vitality and energy to a despondent Charles Wesley on this Pentecost day 1738, a new energy which would issue forth in amazing hymns

that enabled people to express their faith with new depth and dynamism. That same spirit broke through the formalism and seriousness of John Wesley – giving him new assurance of his salvation and new zeal to go out and preach in the highways and by-ways.

Let's go back to that room in Jerusalem where the disciples gathered. Remember Jesus had recruited them in Galilee – a relatively rural backwater and from ordinary everyday occupations as fishermen and farmers. They were not the obvious material for the bringing in of God's kingdom.

And yet that is what happened. How did it happen? From that room emerged not just eleven men but a community released from fear and released from ties of family and nation to be global citizens of the new spiritual Jerusalem. Those men, who had only recently been local men of Galilee, gazing bemused into the heavens are now energised to create a movement across every human-created boundary. The movement of the Spirit of God sets them on the move – converting them into pilgrim people.

One can see this dynamic over and over again in the history of the Church. The Pentecostal Movement which has so animated new churches and re-invigorated ancient ones started in Azusa Street Los Angeles in 1906. That movement has influenced Methodism but it has also taken much of its inspiration from Methodism, too. For on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 John Wesley was transformed from a rather prickly, formal; Anglican clergyman who thought that to preach in the open air was sin – into a man on the move, travelling the country, preaching in mining communities, among sailors and farmers as well as to the upper class of his day. Moved by his 24<sup>th</sup> May experience he used lay people to preach – he even used women preachers.

The old wineskins could not contain this new effervescent message of Wesley and so the distance between his beloved Anglican Church and his new movement grew wider. New wineskins were needed to contain this powerful message, preached with vigour and conviction to all who would listen.

This morning we have baptised Aoife. Last week we baptised Alfie and William. There is a close link between baptism and Pentecost. Baptism is about a transition in which we pass through water from membership of a human family into membership of a wider family – the family of God's Church – both locally and universally. Wherever these three young people go in life – their baptism here is valid and lifelong. Baptism is, as it were, our certificate of dual citizenship – at one and the same time in a human family and within God's pilgrim people, spirit-filled, living and witnessing across all human made boundaries.

I think that many of us watched the Royal wedding and were impressed in so many ways but for me and for many to whom I have spoken, the highlight of the day, much to the surprise of the press, was the sermon by Bishop Michael Curry.

I think Mr Wesley would have enlisted him immediately as one of his preachers and who knows if Bishop Michael would have been contained in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican Church. There were a few raised eyebrows from the 21<sup>st</sup> century Anglicans in St George's Chapel.

Bishop Michael's message was a powerful and persuasive one- focussing on the dynamic power of love to change human hearts at the individual and collective level. He spoke of the redemptive power of love to create a new world, to achieve the seemingly impossible and move us towards the Kingdom that God desires to bring on earth.

In the final section of his sermon Bishop Michael picked up the imagery of fire – how the harnessing of fire was one of the greatest human discoveries, allowing a whole host of human possibilities impossible previously. The energy of love, he said, is fire, fire channelled to change the old world to the new – the new earth that God longs to bring to fruition. The fire of the spirit is still alive at work in the world. We saw that in Windsor yesterday and we can experience it in Wesley's Chapel today. May the wind and the fire rush through this place and touch every one of us with God's spirit of love and power.

God of power  
May the boldness of your Spirit transform us,  
May the gentleness of your Spirit lead us,  
And may the gifts of your Spirit equip us  
To serve and worship you  
Now and always. Amen