

A service for 5th June, 2022 – Pentecost (StF)

Call to Worship: Joel chapter 2 verses 28 and 29

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” Amen.

We shall sing a hymn by Margaret Old, which is set to The Skye Boat Song. Hymn number 394, ‘Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,’

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,

Gentle as is the dove,

Teach us the truth and help us believe,

Show us the Saviour’s love.

1. You spoke to us long, long ago,

Gave us the written word;

We read it still, needing its truth,

Through it God’s voice is heard. *Chorus*

2. Without your help we fail our Lord,

We cannot live his way;

We need your power, we need your strength,

Following Christ each day. *Chorus*

© Margaret V. Old (1932 – 2001)

Let us pray.

Almighty and everlasting God, we come to worship you this morning as we celebrate your great gift of the Holy Spirit, who led to the birth of the Church. Help us to remember that you are here with us, not only now but at all times. May we pray to you in faith, sing your praise with gratitude, and listen to your word with eagerness, for you are the God who created life throughout our universe, whose compassion sustains us day by day, whose glory we see in the beauty of creation and whose boundless, faithful love we see in the life, death and resurrection of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Despite our sinfulness, you have reached out to us from the beginning of our history and you love us so much that you sent our Lord Jesus into the world not only to live our life, but to die an awful, cursed death in order to break Satan’s hold over us. By raising him to life, you opened heaven’s gates and through his grace alone, we now have the free offer of eternal life. Lord of all, our heavenly Father, we worship and adore your Holy Name. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, ‘Merciful Lord’, please respond with, ‘Restore us to righteousness’.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for all the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for everyone who guides, loves and inspires us, but most of all for your undying love. Forgive us when we are selfish or self-righteous, unforgiving and judgmental. Pardon us when we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

‘Merciful Lord’ ‘restore us to righteousness’.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our sinfulness. Renew and restore us, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Re-ignite the embers of our faith, so we may play our part in building your kingdom here.

‘Merciful Lord’ ‘restore us to righteousness’.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more. Hereafter, may the Holy Spirit

enable us to serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

“Breathe on me, Breath of God, / Till I am wholly thine, / Until this earthly part of me / Glows with thy fire divine.” Edwin Hatch’s words remind us of Cleopas and his friend and, of course, John Wesley, whose heart was ‘strangely warmed’ at Aldersgate Street on Pentecost, 1738. We shall sing hymn number 370, ‘Breathe on me, Breath of God;’

**1. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love,
And do what thou wouldst do.**

**2. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Until my heart is pure.
Until with thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.**

**3. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Till I am wholly thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with thy fire divine.**

**4. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
So shall I never die,
But live with thee the perfect life
Of thine eternity.**

© Edwin Hatch (1835 – 1889)

As we are celebrating the Platinum Jubilee this weekend, let us pray for Her Majesty the Queen.

Almighty and Everlasting God, we offer our heartfelt thanks for the reign of our Sovereign Queen Elizabeth II: for her devotion to her duties; for her wisdom, faith and steadfastness; for her dignity, her graciousness and her sense of responsibility. Thank you, Lord, for providing a monarch who is trustworthy and noble, an example of service for us to trust and follow in good and bad times.

As we reflect upon the seventy years of her reign, may we be filled with gratitude that she has served us and the Commonwealth so well in an era of great social, political and economic changes, whatever her own views may have been. May she take pride in her achievements and delight in these celebrations and may your blessing rest upon her and upon this nation evermore. Amen.

We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Loving God, although the world in which we live is wonderful and self-sustaining, the news we hear speaks of its brokenness and daunts our spirits. Nevertheless, we believe that all things are possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of our neighbours, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to rectify the results of

mankind's cruelty, folly, exploitation and indifference which result in so much suffering around the world.

We pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church, as we celebrate its birth two thousand years ago. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission. May the Spirit of truth and love empower us to bear the gospel light to this suffering and sin-darkened world. Renew and invigorate our calling as we seek new ways to serve our communities as we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus.

God of Shalom, we pray for peace throughout the world, though our attention is concentrated at present upon the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. In your mercy Lord, bring about a negotiated peace that enable Ukraine to continue as a sovereign democracy. Reach out to the Ukrainian people, from President Zelenskyy and his advisors, the armed forces and militia, that they may remain steadfast, courageous and undaunted, so they will be able to resist Russia's might and frustrate the Kremlin's aims. We pray for the civilians, mainly women, children, the elderly and disabled, who are trapped in cities that are being bombarded by Russian forces. Hold them close in your care that they may be comforted and protected. May friendly countries provide support not only during the war, but for the time it takes to rebuild Ukraine from the ashes of destruction. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing to friendly countries. Bless those lands and people who offer shelter and support for as long as it is needed and may their compassion ease the trauma of the refugees.

Gracious Lord, inspire and guide the leaders of all nations and opposition groups in the way of peace. Teach them to eschew the use of violence to achieve their aims: instead may they seek to follow the way of justice, mercy and peace. Teach us also to act justly and to care for our neighbours, especially people whom we find it difficult to like.

Lord, we pray for people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of vaccines to impoverished countries where COVID19 is rampant and vaccines to counteract the outbreak of monkeypox. We pray for organizations like All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to famine-stricken Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen that they receive the support they need.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy, fuel and food increases to record levels. We thank you for those who supply and run food banks and for organisations like the Salvation Army which help the poor. Guide the Government, business leaders and local councils to find ways of helping the poor.

We pray for neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble; neighbours who are living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear, particularly everybody who has been unable to mark their loved-one's passing because of restrictions at funerals and gatherings. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.
Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but warm them with your love, so they may find comfort, healing, courage and enduring peace.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by a Presbyterian minister, Revd. Daniel Iverson, for a revivalist campaign in Florida during 1926. We remain seated as we sing hymn number 295, 'Spirit of the living God'. We shall sing it twice, please.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me,

Mould me, fill me.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

© Daniel Iverson (b. 1890)

Our reading is Acts chapter 2 verses 1 to 21

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

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

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

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. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

"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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Amen.

We shall sing the hymn on our sheets, 'Once, a group of frightened people'

**1. Once, a group of frightened people hid inside a bolted room,
Mourning Jesus Christ, who'd left them – it seemed naught could lift their gloom:
But the promise made by Jesus on the eve of Calvary
Was fulfilled for each of them like fire and wind and ecstasy!**

**2. As the Holy Spirit filled them, every sorry soul transformed:
Resolution replaced weakness; for God's breath each heart had warmed;
While the tongues of mundane people were endowed with holy might,
As the impulse of the Spirit turned their darkness into light.**

3. Fled were gloominess and doubting, as their praise and joy they cried;
Bolts were pulled, the door was opened as they boldly poured outside,
While their neighbours, in amazement, swore their mood was excess wine:
Yet their speech, their dance and laughter were the fruits of Pow'r Divine.

4. Pilgrims to the holy city heard the gospel in their tongues:
Christ's salvation was extended and to everyone belongs;
For the grace of God is boundless – Christ has died to save us all
And the power of the Spirit helps us answer Jesu's call!

5. Then empowered by the Spirit, Peter preached unto the Jews –
And three thousand men were baptised in response to Christ's Good News!
So ten dozen helpless people – our Redeemer's 'mustard seed' –
In the power of the Spirit, grew with awe-inspiring speed.

6. May all honour, praise and glory be to God, the Three-in-One:
Give all honour to the Father for the mighty deeds He's done;
We shall praise His Son, Christ Jesus, who revealed the Father's love,
As we glory in the Spirit whom He sent down from above!

M. Rider, 17th May, 2004 {to 'There's a light upon the mountains' H & P 246 // StF188 – written for the organist at Amblecote Methodist Church, Norman Yardley} Modified 25th May, 2022.

Sermon: *'Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"'* Acts 2:13

I was nine or ten when I first heard Luke's account of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the hundred and twenty in that locked room in Jerusalem. The King James Bible was used and I was effectively 'switched off' by the end of the fourth verse. I had this appalling vision of a tempest buffeting the apostles, fire literally burning their heads and this Ghost that made them talk gibberish! It took me several years to overcome a real fear of the Holy Spirit and even longer to invite him into my life.

At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples that God the Father would give them the Spirit of truth to be with them forever. The Good News Bible translates the original Greek, '**Paracletos**' as '**Helper**' but, as such, it is only moderately effective: The NIV translates it as **Counsellor** while other translations give **Comforter**, **Advocate** and **Intercessor** as alternatives, yet the Holy Spirit is also a **teacher** and **encourager**. His purpose is to reveal God's purpose, love and power as he lives within those who obey Christ's call. In him we enter a new, close relationship with God the Father and through the Holy Spirit the risen Jesus himself will live in our hearts.

Rather like his description of Christ's ascension, Luke faced the task of describing the coming of the Holy Spirit that first Pentecost. A literal description is impossible, so the writer tried to compare the effect the Holy Spirit had on the apostles in that room. They were assembled behind bolted doors because they were afraid. They had a profound sense of failure and unworthiness and they lacked both the confidence and direction to obey Christ's commission, '**Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.**' Peter, especially, must have felt his position beyond redemption, because he had denied even knowing Jesus, after he had boasted that he would lay down his life for him. Surely such a weak vessel could never lead a revolution?

However, when he came, the Holy Spirit filled them almost as though God was breathing new life into their bodies. The Hebrew for the **Holy Spirit** is **RUACH**, which means God's breath, whilst the Greek for Spirit, **PNEUMA**, can also mean the same. So these men and women experienced a new life and Luke's description of the **KIND** of life as being fired up, burning with zeal for God is intended to explain what happened next: they poured out into the street, praising God in ecstatic tongues that Jews from the

boundaries of the Diaspora could understand; when cynical Jews mocked them for being drunk, it was Peter who rebuked them, saying, **“Fellow-Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, listen to me and let me tell you what this means. These people are not drunk, as you suppose; it is only nine o’clock in the morning.”** He then preached his first sermon, as a result of which around three thousand were baptized into their fellowship and the Church was born in the Spirit’s power. There are many examples of how the Spirit can inspire ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

John Pounds founded the first Ragged School in Portsmouth in 1803. He had been crippled after falling from a topmast when apprenticed at the Royal Dockyards, so he bought a shop with a living room above the workshop and made a good living as a rough cobbler, repairing boots and making clogs, even though the shop measured five by two and a half metres. When John’s brother, a sailor, was unable to look after his crippled son, John took him in. He made special boots for the boy that – in time – cured his crippled feet. However, that wasn’t enough for John, who taught him the trade and made him a partner.

This experience led John to consider the plight of the street urchins who begged and stole in Portsmouth’s streets. He decided that they needed more than the basics of life, so he enticed them into his workshop with the promise of a baked apple or a baked potato, so that he could teach them. Despite the size of his shop, John taught up to forty of these rough children at a time, without recourse to corporal punishment and no child was said to have left unable to read, write, or do simple sums. In addition, he taught them nature study, history and the Scriptures. He nursed them when they were ill and begged respectable clothes, so that some could accompany him to church. He put a sign above the shop door, **‘Little vagabonds preferred’** and accepted only children whose parents could not afford to pay for their education.

Others heard of his ‘Ragged School’, visited it and copied it and John Pounds’ vision spread throughout England and Wales, including the Black Country. Although Cradley was well-known for chain-making and coal mining in the mid-1800s, many people in the town led unhappy lives, because of poor housing, drunkenness, ignorance and gambling. Like many Black Country towns, Cradley had a large number of pigeon-fanciers, too many of whom gambled away their housekeeping money on pigeon-races. Indeed, they often spent their wages on beer and pigeon feed, whilst wives and children went hungry.

1860 Thomas Crowther came to live Cradley and was saddened to see the state of the town. Nevertheless, rather than rushing to condemn these hopeless gamblers, Thomas bought pigeons of his own and joined the pigeon-fliers, though he neither gambled, nor drank beer with them. As a result, he won their respect and even friendship, so later in the year some of these rough men agreed to allow four or five of their children to be taught how to read, write and do sums at his home in Butchers Lane. After all, they knew that any adult who could read and write would find better-paid employment than theirs. Besides educating the children, Thomas Crowther and friends opened his house for Sunday worship and it was so successful that by 1863, there were regularly congregations of more than three hundred, so larger premises were needed. An ironmaster, Noah Hingley and friends helped to build the High Town Ragged School in Mapletree Lane and it opened in May that year, giving hundreds of poor children an education and opportunities that they otherwise would not have had. Whilst most people would consider John Pounds and Thomas Crowther as ‘ordinary’ men, both worked in the power of the Spirit and transformed many children’s lives.

As Twenty-first Century disciples, the Lord challenges us to pick up the mantle passed from St. Peter to John Wesley: we are called to serve all-comers, not just fellow-Christians, just as Jesus reached out to Gentiles, outcasts and even Samaritans. No one is outside the scope of God's love – even people we find it hard to like – and the needs of communities in the post-pandemic age are great indeed. We must let the light of God's love shine from our actions, for only when we live out our faith will others hear and respond to our message of salvation and turn to Christ. Amen.

Before our closing hymn, I am going to be pedantic and controversial – nothing new there – because I am going to suggest it reasonable to refer to the Holy Spirit as a feminine being. Let me explain: although the Spirit is traditionally referred to as male, the word 'Spirit' in Hebrew is 'Ruach' and it is a feminine noun, in which case ought we to use 'she'? In Greek 'Spirit' is 'Pneuma', but it is gender neutral, so I think it is questionable to refer to the Spirit as 'It'. I've left it till last, so you aren't distracted during the remainder of the service and I'm not asking for an answer today but at least consider what I have said.

Our closing hymn, written by Brian Wren, reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not trapped in ancient history, but He / She works in and through us now and always, if we let Her. Incidentally, I much prefer the version of this hymn in "Hymns and Psalms" and can't understand the revision. Hymn number 398, "There's a Spirit in the air,"

1. There's a spirit in the air,
Telling Christians everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
2. Lose your shyness, find your tongue;
Tell the world what God has done:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!
3. When believers break the bread,
When a hungry child is fed,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
4. Still his Spirit leads the fight,
Seeing wrong and setting right:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!
5. When a stranger's not alone,
Where the homeless find a home,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
6. May his Spirit fill our praise,
Guide our thoughts and change our ways:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!
7. There's a Spirit in the air,
Calling people everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.