

A service for 23rd May, 2021. Pentecost.

Call to Worship: Joel chapter 2 verses 28, 29 and 32

“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. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” Amen.

I am going to be pedantic and controversial – nothing new there – because I am going to refer to the Holy Spirit as a feminine being. Let me explain: although the Spirit is usually referred to as male, the word ‘Spirit’ in Hebrew is ‘Ruach’ and it is a feminine noun. In Greek ‘Spirit’ is ‘Pneuma’, but it is gender neutral, and I think it is questionable to refer to the Spirit as ‘It’. So, for today the Spirit will be called ‘she’ and you may complain if you wish at the end of worship.

Our first hymn was written in 1970 by former Methodist minister, Revd. Fred Pratt Green. It was a response to John Wilson for a Whitsuntide hymn set to Sir John Dykes Bower’s melody “Ludgate” which had been composed twenty-two years earlier. Hymn number 388, ‘Let every Christian pray, / This day, and every day, / Come, Holy Spirit, come!’

1. Let every Christian pray,

This day, and every day,

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Was not the Church we love

Commissioned from above?

Come. Holy Spirit, come!

2. The Spirit brought to birth

The Church of Christ on earth

To seek and save the lost:

God never has withdrawn

Since that tremendous dawn

Those gifts of Pentecost.

3. Always the Spirit strove

To teach her how to love;

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Age after age, anew,

She proved the gospel true;

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

4. Only the Spirit’s power

Can fit us for this hour;

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Instruct, inspire, unite;

And make us see the light;

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Creator of all life throughout the universe, whose wisdom and power are far beyond our understanding, we have come to worship you this morning with reverence and joy for you are our God and Saviour and you alone are worthy of all honour, glory power and praise. From the earliest times, you have striven to draw us close to you: first through the Patriarchs and then the Prophets. When we still rebelled against you, you gave your only Son, Jesus Christ, to share our human form, to teach

us in his words and deeds how to live life to the full. Your boundless love took Christ Jesus to Calvary to atone for the sins of the world and when you raised our Lord from the tomb, you offered us life beyond our earthly span. Today, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit who enables us to know and do your holy will. All honour and glory be yours now and evermore. Amen.

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

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’ ***‘forgive and renew us’.***

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

‘Merciful Lord’ ***‘forgive and renew us’.***

Heavenly Father, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and trust you have already graciously pardoned us. Lord God, teach us to share your gift of love with all-comers, so we may honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus, our risen Lord. Amen.

We shall say the Lord’s Prayer.

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**

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs. When I say, 'Lord in your mercy', please respond, 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

Loving God, 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 bring an end to so much suffering around the world. May your living Spirit guide us in our discipleship.

'Lord in your mercy' 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

We pray for all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for churches throughout the world. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and to serve him in unity of mission. May your Spirit help us bear the gospel light to this suffering and sin-darkened world. We pray that you will bring us safely through this pandemic and renew our calling.

'Lord in your mercy' 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

God of shalom, of peace and unity, we grieve about the brokenness of relationships in so many countries. We pray for the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice. Breathe your Spirit upon national leaders; warm their hearts and lead them along the paths of peace, mercy and justice. Remember, particular the conflict in the Holy Land, let there be an end to hostilities and the start of meaningful negotiations that will enable Jews and Arabs to co-exist peacefully.

'Lord in your mercy' 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

Loving Lord, inspire and guide people who care for our environment and who are striving to keep earth habitable for future generations. We pray, too, for people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of coronavirus vaccines to countries like India and Brazil, where many people are suffering with and dying from coronavirus and where their health systems are being overwhelmed. May your Spirit inspire countries that can offer support to do so swiftly.

'Lord in your mercy' 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

Heavenly Father, we remember before you people whose memories and faculties are diminishing because of a dementia and also their families, friends and carers who are struggling to cope and whose distress has been increased by this pandemic. Grant all of them the support and hope they need to keep going.

We pray for people we know 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, in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. 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.

'Lord in your mercy' 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

We ask you to bless everybody who is working for our wellbeing, especially members of the NHS, scientists who are developing vaccines and cures, for carers and key-workers, as they try to bring us through this time of trial and anguish. Keep them safe and grant them success in their endeavours.

'Lord in your mercy' 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

Abba, Father God, bless us all, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us to lead Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers, in the name of our risen Lord Jesus, to whom be glory and honour for evermore. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Father Brian Foley a Liverpudlian Roman Catholic priest, whose ministry was spent entirely in Lancashire. The hymn comes from the experience of prayer and wrestling with current theological problems. Hymn, number 382, 'Holy Spirit, come, confirm us in the truth that Christ makes known;'

**1. Holy, Spirit, come, confirm us
In the truth that Christ makes known;
We have faith and understanding
Through your helping gifts alone.**

**2. Holy Spirit, come, console us,
Come as Advocate to plead;
Loving Spirit from the Father,
Grant in Christ the help we need.**

**3. Holy Spirit, come, renew us,
Come yourself to make us live;
Holy through your loving presence,
Holy through the gifts you give.**

**4. Holy Spirit, come, possess us,
You the love of Three in One,
Holy Spirit of the Father,
Holy Spirit of the Son.**

© Brian Foley (1919 – 2000)

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.

Sermon: Pentecost, Power & Peace. (Acts 2: 1 – 21)

A week after the risen Christ ascended to heaven, a hundred and twenty followers gathered in the upper room of a house in Jerusalem. They were in the holy city at the time of the Festival of Pentecost, Shavuot to Jews, who celebrate God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses. How wonderful it is that the New Covenant occurred on the anniversary of the old one. However, they were not there specifically to celebrate the festival, because, shortly before his ascension, Jesus had told them, **‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’** They had been commissioned to take the Good News to the ends of the earth and to baptise new followers in Jesus’ name, but the hundred and twenty were unprepared and fearful. That is why they were in a locked room, afraid they would be seized by the authorities, either soldiers of Caiaphas, the high priest, or the Romans.

The ten dozen had good reason to feel inadequate, for they looked to the twelve disciples, (Matthias had replaced Judas Iscariot), for leadership, yet the twelve had let down Jesus in so many ways and on many occasions. They had frequently misunderstood his teaching; some vied for privileged positions in God’s kingdom; they had all deserted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; only John had witnessed the crucifixion and they only believed the resurrection when Jesus appeared before them, showed them his wounds and ate a piece of broiled fish to prove he wasn’t a ghost! Even Peter, the rock on whom Jesus said he would build his Church, had an amazing ability to metaphorically put his foot in his mouth, nearly every time he spoke. He must have felt particularly helpless, because he knew how he’d boasted that he would die with the Lord, yet denied even knowing him on three occasions in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ palace. He was aware of his own weaknesses beside his friends’. He knew, too, that none of them were educated, sophisticated men, so they would be easy prey for the wiles of Scribes, Sadducees and Pharisees, who had tried so hard to catch out Jesus. Whilst Jesus had always outwitted them, Peter would have been pessimistic about how the apostles would fare against the religious Establishment when they tried to spread the gospel message.

In their powerlessness, they must have prayed to be transformed into worthy witnesses, but none could have anticipated what happened in that room: something so mighty that Luke could not give a literal description, but could only use similes to give a flavour of the power of the Holy Spirit. He said it was almost as though a mighty wind filled the room – the Hebrew for the Holy Spirit is **Ruach** – God’s breath! We have all probably gasped in amazement some time in our lives; well, the coming of the Spirit must have filled their whole being, body and soul, with God’s power. The effect of the indwelling Spirit was compared with individual tongues of fire settling on their heads – John Wesley’s description of his heart being **‘strangely warmed’** at Aldersgate Street at Pentecost 1738 is another way of describing what happened in that locked room. Their hearts were warmed with love and their minds were fired with joyful, evangelistic zeal.

Though the coming of the Ruach cannot be described in concrete terms: her effects were truly amazing. That group of frightened, hopeless failures was at once filled

with such great joy that they began to shout and sing aloud – some in foreign tongues, some with tongues of angels. The doors were unlocked and they poured out into the street, glorifying God so loudly that passing Jews were astonished, particularly those who had come from far across the Roman world, for they heard simple Galileans praising God in their native languages. What was happening was a reversal of Babel, when the Lord God scattered the proud builders of a tower to heaven and confused their plans by giving them a wide variety of languages. Through the Spirit the apostles were able to share good news with everyone. Naturally, some ‘righteous’ Jews scornfully declared that they had been drinking, which prompted Peter to do something he probably never thought possible.

Peter addressed the crowd with neither fear of drying up, nor of an adverse reaction to what he said. He observed it was too early for he and his friends to have become drunk, but instead they were fulfilling the words of the prophet Joel – somehow he had also developed a remarkable understanding of the Scriptures and of how Christ had lived out the words of the Law and the Prophets. **‘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.’** Peter proceeded to preach how Jesus was the Messiah, had been crucified and had been raised from the dead, then he called for his listeners to repent and be baptized in Jesus’ name. When he finished preaching, more than three thousand turned to Jesus. To my shame, the result of my first sermon at Brierley Hill was several burnt lunches!

Peter and the apostles were amazed everyone who was baptised also received the Spirit who gave them joy, understanding of both the Scriptures and what God wanted them to do. Peter was able to heal the crippled and even raised Tabitha in Jesus’ name. Luke’s Book, Acts, relates how the Holy Spirit transformed the one hundred and twenty feeble followers into a mighty Church that has changed the history of the world. The Spirit acts as a hot-line between Christ and his followers and she grants us the wisdom, strength and courage to serve the Lord. The Spirit brought out qualities in the apostles that made Jews and Gentiles want to share the Good News and receive baptism into Christ, for the fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness and harmony – truly a fulfilment of the Hebrew word, shalom. The Spirit drove believers from that locked room and gave them the confidence to brave a hostile world.

The Holy Spirit is not confined to the dust of history: she burns within all who trust in Christ. She has guided and inspired people like the Wesleys, Grenville Sharp, Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoffer, William Booth, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela – even pop musician, Bob Geldof with Live Aid. We face the same challenge as the apostles. The Spirit calls us to leave the security of these walls, to brave an increasingly secularised world, to witness to our Lord Jesus in words and deeds, for only by living out the gospel will we warm the hearts of our neighbours and bring them to Jesus. Don’t be afraid, for the Lord has promised he will be with us all to the end of this age and he is – in the Holy Spirit. Let her guide us as she wishes, for if we do, we shall glorify God and shall find renewal of our souls. Amen.

Our closing hymn, written by Brian Wren, reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not trapped in ancient history, but 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.

© *Brian A. Wren {born 1936}*

Benediction

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