

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – May 31 2020 (Pentecost)

Hello and welcome to ***Pentecast 2020*** - a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for Pentecost Sunday, 31 May 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Alison for joining in the preparation of this week's edition.

Call to Worship:

At Pentecost we rejoice in and meditate on the coming of the Holy Spirit, the gift, the helper, the aspect of God forever with us.

In the first chapter of the first book of our Bible we read:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Music¹ – "Einleitung, oder Sonnenaufgang" (Introduction, or Sunrise)
from *Also sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, cond. Herbert Von Karajan

Prayers and Meditation

A collect for Pentecost:

Almighty and ever-living God, you fulfilled the promises of Easter by sending your Holy Spirit and opening the way of life eternal to every race and nation.

Keep us in the unity of your Spirit, that every tongue may tell of your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen

Holy Lord God, we can see it now. From 2020 and with 20-20 hindsight we can see.

We can see how it fits. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Together from the beginning. From that day, if we can call it a day, when the world went from nothing to something, from darkness and vacuum to light and substance.

And around and below and above and in everything – was you. Indescribable. Immortal. Invisible. Infinite. From before all time – you are.

And then there's us. Inadequate in our vocabulary. Inconsistent and fickle in our response. Yet the chosen form in which you relaunched your project to correct your Creation's interactions. Jesus, God made flesh, dwelt among us *full of grace and truth*.

But Jesus could not stay forever. Resurrected, he set the seal on his own life and set the scene for the empowering of ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Which they have. For nearly 2000 years.

Just as the miracle of sunrise returns day after day, grant us a fresh realisation of your love and power and an ever-replenished share in the Spirit. **Your** Spirit, from you and of you, perpetually present for your Church as it strives to fulfil its mission in your world.

Forgive us when we take a wrong direction, look inward instead of out to the world, look after ourselves more than others. Set us free from the chains of doubt and self-doubt and show us how to become what you already know we can be.

In the name of Christ your Son we offer these thoughts and all our prayers.

In the words of Jesus, we join together in the family prayer of the Church:

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.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Acts 2.1-13

When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. ² Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

⁵ There were Jews living in Jerusalem, religious people who had come from every country in the world. ⁶ When they heard this noise, a large crowd gathered. They were all excited, because all of them heard the believers talking in their own languages. ⁷ In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, "These people who are talking like this are Galileans! ⁸ How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages? ⁹ We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia—yet all of us hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done!"

¹² Amazed and confused, they kept asking each other, "What does this mean?"

¹³ But others made fun of the believers, saying, "These people are drunk!"

Reflection (1)

Every so often, when I have asked a volunteer to read for me in church, they have given a conditional response – *as long as there aren't any long or difficult words*. If you recognise yourself in that then don't feel bad and I am not getting at you – geographical and personal names give us some context in readings from scripture but it's good if they don't dominate the way we think about a particular passage.

In today's scripture, this passage from Acts which I suspect is being used in the vast majority of Christian churches around the world this weekend, we have a list of people and places; nationalities and homelands. I always think that this list is like a roll-call of the first members of the Christian Church, the founders and followers of the Way when the first branch was being set up in Jerusalem. We get to hear more about how the church organised itself in the following pages and chapters, of course. But this passage is not about people and places, it is about God.

How do you visualise the waiting apostles?

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.

I have seen imagined illustrations of this group seated around the walls of what looks like a purpose-built room, kitted out a bit like a medieval chapter house or possibly like a Presbyterian Elders' meeting, side by side on benches or chairs and waiting. I am not sure there was quite such a fixed appointment for this. They had gathered together behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities before – they were doing it again. Perhaps some were getting food ready, others going over what they knew, remembering the latest and last things that Jesus had said to them. Waiting, and wondering. And then suddenly...

The wind, the tongues of fire and the gift of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit. For the gift was not the fire, it was what they were now able to do.

There was the gift of communication. The ability to make themselves understood, even to all of these different people. Never again in our scripture is anything really made of this miraculous instant translation. The gift of getting through. And the gift, of course, of having the courage to do it.

The prophet Isaiah springs to mind, whose response to the challenge of his call was to say, 'not me – nothing worthwhile can come out of these unclean lips of mine'. The same applied and was to apply to so many who doubted their gifts. Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah.

But the key thing is that here was something of God, back in the room. Back with his Creation, and available not just to those who were in the right place at the right time to hear Jesus speak or touch his robe. But available to all, and each recipient of the Spirit could also pass it on. There is a horrible metaphorical parallel with the spread of a virus but sometimes we can't help the coincidences of language. The spread of the Spirit was to be rapid. And God, this part of God, this active aspect of God, would never be absent from the world again.

And we, humankind, were given the tools to spread the Word and keep spreading it. We've refined those over the years. I am losing count of the options for holding online meetings and services, the various platforms for sharing text and photos.

The means of communication change. The language we use, the places we do it, the clothes we feel it's appropriate to wear while doing it! The hierarchy of roles within the church – who we allow and encourage to do it. What remains the same is God. For he has always been the same. And that's an idea that Peter gives a nod to as we continue the story of Pentecost in a few minutes.

Let's pause to hear words in another language. Not our language or Peter's language but the Latin of the Church of the Middle Ages in a Pentecost song. Do look at the

podcast transcript if you want to follow along and see an amateur translation. You may well recognise the tune.

The Gregorian chant, *Veni Creator Spiritus* – Come, Spirit and Creator

Music: *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Gregorian Chant) –
The Monks of the Benedictine Monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos
from the album *Canto Gregoriano* (1994)

*Veni Creator Spiritus,
mentes tuorum visita,
imple superna gratia,
quae tu creasti, pectora.*

*Come, Spirit and Creator:
enter our souls;
fill with heavenly grace
the hearts you have made.*

*Qui Paraclitus diceris,
donum Dei altissimi,
fons vivus, ignis, caritas,
et spiritalis unctio.*

*You who are called the Comforter,
gift of God on high
the source of life, fire and love
and balm for the spirit.*

*Tu septiformis munere,
dextræ Dei tu digitus,
tu rite promissum Patris,
sermone ditans guttura.*

*You give sevenfold gifts,
Finger of God's right hand!
You deliver on the Father's promise,
empowering our throats to speak*

*Accende lumen sensibus,
infunde amorem cordibus,
infirma nostri corporis
virtute firmans perpeti.*

*Kindle a light in our minds;
infuse our hearts with love;
and to our feeble bodies give
(your) eternal strength*

*Gloria Patri Domino
natoque, qui a mortuis
surrexit, ac Paraclito
in saeculorum saecula. Amen*

*Glory to God the Father,
to the one who was born and died
and rose, and to the Holy Spirit
for ever. Amen*

(Assumed written by 9th century Benedictine monk Rabanus Maurus,
translation by Bill)

What happened next?

Scripture: Acts 2.14-21

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the other eleven apostles and in a loud voice began to speak to the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, listen to me and let me tell you what this means. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose; it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ Instead, this is what the prophet Joel spoke about:

¹⁷ 'This is what I will do in the last days, God says:

I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.

Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;

your young men will see visions,
and your old men will have dreams.

¹⁸ Yes, even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will proclaim my message.

¹⁹ I will perform miracles in the sky above
and wonders on the earth below.
There will be blood, fire, and thick smoke;
²⁰ the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will turn red as blood,
before the great and glorious Day of the Lord comes.
²¹ And then, whoever calls out to the Lord for help will be saved.'

Reflection (2)

Even this brief excerpt of the Acts narrative is a story of two halves. The first half sees the coming of the Holy Spirit – God enabling the Body of Christ to get up and running. The second half shows the first fruits of this injection of inspiration. Peter gets on his feet.

In its way this is as miraculous as the rushing wind and the tongues of fire. We tend to remark on this both now and when we hear stories of Peter pronouncing later on the universality of the Church – that encounter later in Acts with the centurion and the dream of food in a blanket. Suddenly he's not the fisherman anymore. Not the impetuous but ill-advised actor in the Transfiguration story or at the foot-washing. Still less the fearful denier of the High Priest's courtyard.

Goodness knows what Peter expected when Jesus named him. Peter, of course, is the acquired name. Simon was of ancient Jewish origin. Peter is from the Latin; the Greek version Cephas also crops up in the later books of the New Testament. Goodness knows what Peter the Rock thought that would mean. But to become the visible head of a religious movement?

But this is what the Spirit has been able to do. At one moment hiding out behind locked doors for fear of what might happen if the Jewish leaders tracked them down. The next, flinging open those doors and bursting into the street, suddenly empowered and emboldened and aware of what was possible. A bunch of men – and the revised list of twelve apostles were all men – able to communicate.

It's remarkable how often you see this pattern repeating itself. The hesitant but agreeable follower, keeping out of the limelight and seeking only a backstage job, if that. Then forced to acknowledge their gifts.

I mentioned some of the Old Testament candidates earlier. Moses at the Burning Bush, Isaiah and Jeremiah when they were called. Jonah running away to sea, in his own special way.

But we can leap forward to modern times and discover others whose purpose and calling were changed through the transforming intervention of the Spirit. John Newton the former slave ship captain summed it up in his hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Another John, Wesley, had his own path corrected after a strangely warming experience in the City of London.

And through nearly thirty years' experience of the candidating process for our own ministry in the United Reformed Church I can testify to those who have ended up taking a more active role as part of the Body of Christ than they ever thought possible. I've not encountered anyone who thought they would be a life-long fisherman. But social worker, yes. Teacher, telecommunications specialist, policeman, architect, even the odd engineer.

Peter isn't quoting the Old Testament prophet Amos just as a vague indication of dramatic things that God once told the world would happen.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

*your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.*

He is showing the whole spectrum of possibilities that are open to God's people – which is all people. The young, the old of each gender can wipe their individual slates clean and each enjoy a new role as the dreamers, the visionaries, the prophets and messengers who will take forward the work of the Kingdom.

The Spirit gives potential to anyone and everyone who makes a connection. Like an inexhaustible battery. Recognise **your** potential. Potential for change and for service.

Amen

We will again punctuate our prayers with an appropriate short song
[from the Iona Community Wild Goose Worship Group, taken from their album, *Enemy of Apathy*]:

*Come, Holy Spirit,
gracious heavenly dove.
Come, fire of love.*

Prayers of Intercession

Lord, your Spirit was present through all time, beside you at Creation, inspiring the patriarchs and the prophets, giving the right words to your people at the right time. You still come to us as a fire of inspiration, a wind blowing through your Creation looking to give power to those who can and will capture the potential of the Spirit. Help us to receive what you give.

*Come, Holy Spirit,
gracious heavenly dove.
Come, fire of love.*

Lord, your Spirit gave Peter the courage to stand in front of crowds and preach, and to stand in courts and before rulers and faith leaders to dispute and testify. Give us courage to take the Spirit and pass it on through our words and actions.

In a time when the world is focused on itself, help all of the human family to acknowledge that we should look outside ourselves, share the love you give, actively seek a purpose that involves other people. Even other nations. For the world does not stand still to wait for the West to find epidemiological answers. Issues of conflict, abuse, hunger, homelessness, displacement and refugees persist. Our calling is to care; inspire us and our leaders to find the right way.

*Come, Holy Spirit,
gracious heavenly dove.
Come, fire of love.*

Yet we must acknowledge the foundation of our mission will need to be reinforced and redesigned in this time of learning to live with Covid-19 in the world.

Show us a path forward that addresses new needs while still responding to the commandment of Jesus to show and share your love. To care.

And the circle of care must embrace those who suffer from the virus, those who have suffered and are recovering, those who have lost loved ones. In Mental Health Awareness Week give us grace to recognise those needs in others and in ourselves.

We thank you again for those whose calling is to care in myriad ways. Grant to them and to us energy and resilience, and once again inspiration through your Spirit who came at Pentecost.

*Come, Holy Spirit,
gracious heavenly dove.
Come, fire of love.*

We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus.

Amen

Here is a longer song – in its language the author recognises the feminine Hebrew noun and female images used in the books of Moses and the Psalms to characterise and describe the Holy Spirit, as well as the ‘like a dove’ vision of the Spirit reported by John at the baptism of Jesus.

Hymn *Enemy of apathy*
[Wild Goose Worship Group, Iona Community]

She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters,
hovering on the chaos of the world's first day;
she sighs and she sings, mothering creation,
waiting to give birth to all the Word will say.

She wings over earth, resting where she wishes,
lighting close at hand or soaring through the skies;
she nests in the womb, welcoming each wonder,
nourishing potential hidden to our eyes.

She dances in fire, startling her spectators,
waking tongues of ecstasy where dumbness reigned;
she weans and inspires all whose hearts are open,
Nor can she be captured, silenced or restrained.

For she is the Spirit, one with God in essence,
gifted by the Saviour in eternal love;
she is the key opening the scriptures,
enemy of apathy and heavenly dove.

Words by John L Bell and Graham Maule, reproduced by permission

Blessing

May we all inherit the zeal of Peter through the transforming power of the Spirit. May we find our function in the Body of Christ. May we see Christ in our neighbours and offer love in action.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever

Amen

Celebrating Pentecost in a time of lockdown means no family get-togethers and picnics, no special church lunches or big production choral contributions. Yet it demands a joyful response and maybe even a loud one. So we have found some music to let us celebrate the birthday of the Church with a bang. Or two, or three. And a choir. Singing in Russian...

Music: *1812 Overture* (final section) –
Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and Choir, conducted by Neeme Jarvi

Credits

"Einleitung, oder Sonnenaufgang" (Introduction, or Sunrise), from *Also sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss was recorded by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Herbert Von Karajan

The Gregorian chant *Veni Creator Spiritus* was recorded by the choir of the monks of the Benedictine Monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos, from the 1993 album, Canto Gregoriano

The incidental song *Come, Holy Spirit* by John L Bell and Graham Maule was sung by the Wild Goose Collective and taken from their album *Enemy of Apathy*.

From the same album came the song *Enemy of apathy*, also by John Bell and Graham Maule.

And the excerpt from Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* was recorded by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and Choir, conducted by Neeme Jarvi.

Before we finish, here is a greeting from our furthest-flung listener so far, Alison Warner, who lives on the island of Fuerteventura:

Hello. This is Alison Warner sending greetings from Fuerteventura to all of you there in Coventry. I hope you're all healthy, doing well, keeping safe, and I look forward – hopefully – to seeing you all later in the year. Good luck; love and best wishes to everybody. Bye for now.

Thank you as ever for listening to this podcast.

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ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the Good News Bible.