

The coming of the Spirit and the early church 07/11/21

Acts 2:1-13, John 16:5-11

We are nearly at the end of our Journey through the Bible as we think this morning about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the formation of the early church.

The Holy Spirit, the third part of the Trinity, had been promised as far back as about 400 BC when the book of Joel prophesies that God will pour out his spirit on all mankind. But would the disciples remember that as it became more obvious that Jesus would not be with them forever? We know from our own experience how devastating it can be when someone is no longer there. Even when not separated by death – perhaps they have moved away, or the priorities of their life have changed – we can be left wondering how we will cope without them.

The disciples had already adjusted from the formal (and demanding) God rooted in the temple and surrounded by ritual to the approach of his Son, Jesus, preaching love, forgiveness and sharing. What would they have made of the prospect of a third and intangible form. One which I have found in different Bible translations and commentaries variously described as advocate, helper, comforter and counsellor. They were struggling to accept that Jesus would be leaving them. How could they at the same time be puzzling over what he was saying about help coming? And help that could only come when he had left?

But despite this the disciples follow instructions. They wait in Jerusalem to receive what God has promised them.

While they are waiting, we are given a glimpse of how the early church was organising itself. Last week we heard about the disciples hiding in fear indoors. The passage focusses on Thomas's need to see the risen Jesus, but begins with Jesus gently greeting them, breathing on them and asking them to receive the gift of the holy Spirit. By the time of today's passage from Acts things have changed. The remaining eleven of the original disciples are staying together, and along with some of Jesus family and some other women they spend time in prayer. There are others who have joined them. We are told of a gathering of 120 people who elect a successor to Judas Iscariot. This is a very different picture to that of eleven men hiding themselves away.

They were gathered together again on that dramatic night when the Holy Spirit arrived filling the house with wind and tongues of fire. Into the street they went and proclaimed their message in a way that people from many different countries could understand. The Spirit had brought with it the confidence and the ability to begin their mission to the whole world.

The events of Pentecost marked the beginning of the disciple's mission to spread the good news of Jesus world-wide. Begun by Peter and the eleven the early Christian church began to take on characteristics that we would recognise today. There were baptisms. A communal life developed, generosity with property, eating together and praying together. Soon it became apparent that preaching and teaching were being neglected because of the practical needs of the community and further leaders were appointed.

The Christian message began to spread into other cities around the Mediterranean and as communities developed the churches leaders particularly Peter and Paul visited and wrote to the individual churches encouraging them and advising them. These letters which form a significant part of the New Testament are full of reminders of the importance of being led by the Spirit in all things.

During the week I took a service at one of the many sets of retirement flats in our parish. Afterwards we were discussing the Holy Spirit, and the contrast between the two passages – last weeks and this weeks gospel readings. The Spirit firstly gifted as a gentle breath to a small group of frightened people became a phenomenon of wind and fire witnessed by many who tipped out into the street to share their faith with a new found confidence. One person reminded me that although we can be touched by the Spirit in a quiet and gentle way, we can also be filled to overflowing. Much in the way that Peter was at Pentecost. The Spirit is joyous and uplifting, can be bubbling within us. Remember the ready brek advert and some of the new NHS vaccination ones where people seem to have a protective layer around them that moulds to their shape?. It goes where they go and glows as they glow. If you can see the Holy Spirit at work surely it must look a bit like this.

In our last two Messy Churches we have been looking at the Holy Spirit conscious that we are looking for an image of something intangible. The children cut out hand shapes and stuck them together to make a giant flame – it has been hanging at the back of

St James. We have explored the fruits of the spirit – the tangible characteristics of people who have been touched by the holy Spirit. We know people who display those fruits in their behaviour. Some of them are here this morning.

At the start of John's gospel Christ is described as the light of the world. Like light the holy spirit fills the available space – even a small light can make a difference over a large area. We can show that light by our actions as we live out the characteristics of the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We can feel the comfort as others radiate those characteristics to us. Feel that invisible arm around our shoulders in difficult moments.

I want to conclude with those words from the end of the grace:

The fellowship of the holy Spirit, be with you all, evermore. Amen.