

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
May 20, 2018 ~ “Pentecost”

There's a story told of a husband and wife both of who were doctors – one a doctor of theology and the other a doctor of medicine. When their doorbell was rung and the receptionist answered, the inquirer would often ask for "the doctor". The receptionist's reply was always: "Do you want the one who preaches or the one who practices?"

We know the theory of Christian living but what we must do is to practice it!

It was on Ascension Day that Jesus warned his disciples they would see him no more – but then, as he also promised, on the 50th day after Easter, today, Pentecost, his Spirit came upon the small and frightened band of disciples to make them into the Church – which is why Pentecost is described as the birthday of the Church. From that day on the Gospel of Christ has been proclaimed to all nations, the forgiveness of sins promised and men and women everywhere baptised into the fellowship of the Church. So it follows that in the power of the Holy Spirit we try to witness in our generation – and it is good today to welcome the latest member of the Christ Church family, Otilie.

We know the theory of Christian living but what we must do is to practice it!

What form does that practice take – well, in reality, many different forms. Of course gone are the days when it was the clergy who did it all. Now we are all the Church, each one of us having a different role to play, according to our talents and gifts. But above all, perhaps, our calling to be Christ's body in today's world means that we cannot be distant and aloof. We have to be deeply embedded, involved, in the life of our community. We have to try to build up a strong, stable Church – now where have we heard the phrase strong and stable before?! Of course much of the Christian ministry of the Church is hidden and known only to those who have received it – but they do nevertheless remember it – and particularly people remember their first impressions and how they were - or how they were not - welcomed. The other day I went somewhere and on walking in was immediately accosted in a slightly abrupt way with the question “Have you got your ticket?” Where was I – a theatre, a concert hall? No, a church where I had gone for the licensing of a new vicar. Have you got your ticket? I guess that might have been asked on that first Pentecost day – but the story from Acts emphasises as clearly as it can that all are truly welcome ... no one needs a ticket to be part of the Church.

In the story of Pentecost as told in Acts, one of the most vivid images is that of FIRE – hence the red altar cloth. For many, fire holds both fascination and fear. Human beings have been gathering around fire ever since we learned to harness its power as cave dwellers. Without the heat of fire on our bodies, its ability to cook our food, ward off predators and banish the darkness, it is likely that humanity might have died off long ago. Of course fire is

not always our friend. Fire, out of control, kills – we have seen that so graphically this past year as the first anniversary of the Grenfell Tower disaster approaches. Then there are forest fires which bring tragedy to the lives of millions of people each year. In medieval times, people were terrified by fire, and not just the fire that could destroy their wooden houses but also the flames of hell. Even when on the hell of the cross, Jesus refused to condemn those who killed him. Instead he forgave them and offered them love and forgiveness.

All of this is echoed in the events of that first Pentecost. Someone wrote “It is typical of God’s calling that, on the day of Pentecost, instead of being allowed to dwell on what it feels like to have tongues of fire resting on you, the disciples have to go straight out and start preaching.” This is what the Church is called to do – to go out and preach. That doesn’t of course mean we always have to use words. You’ve heard me quote often enough what St Francis said: “Go and preach the Gospel to everyone – and use words if you must.”

The Day of Pentecost is a great celebration. It should encourage us, as those first disciples were encouraged. Our music, our readings, our worship should all combine together to give us renewed strength and hope to forge ahead in the power of the Spirit, reinvigorated by the power of God. Our opening hymn movingly speaks, in the first person, of the flame being sent down from God to rest on each one of us, so that I – we – can work and speak and think for Jesus, praying that I – we – will always take care to guard this holy fire, ready to carry on God’s acts of faith and love by our own lives well lived. Our celebration should remind us that we are all part of the one Church of God.

It must have been an extraordinary experience to have been there in Jerusalem over 2000 years ago? To have felt and heard and experienced first-hand God’s Spirit at work. To have been part of the new thing that God was creating that day – this new community of faith: the church. Well, whilst we weren’t there in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, we are nevertheless part of the church – the family of God – that came into being on that day in Jerusalem so long ago. And just as God’s Spirit filled and inspired those first Christians, so God also fills and inspires all of us who are open to the coming of His Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost we are reminded that God’s fire can totally transform a person’s life. May the tongues of flame and the breath of the wind breathe new life into each one of us, who are the Church, here today.