

Swiss Church in London

Pentecost 2008

Acts 2,1-21

Dear Parishioners,

One beautiful spring morning, a little girl was visiting her grandmother.

They walked out into grandmother's flower garden.

As grandmother was inspecting the progress of her flowers, the little girl decided to try to open a rosebud with her own two hands. But no luck!

As she tried to pull the petals open, they would tear or bruise or wilt or break off completely.

Finally, in frustration, she said, "Nana, I just don't understand it at all.

When God opens a flower, it looks so beautiful, but when I try, it just comes apart." "Well," Grandmother answered, "there's a good reason for that.

God is able to do it because He works *from the inside out!*"

God works from the inside out.

That is the message of Pentecost Sunday.

This is what the disciples finally came to understand at Pentecost.

Jesus had ascended into heaven.

And He had told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit.

Here is where the story of Pentecost picks up.

The disciples are back in the Upper Room waiting and wondering and some of them were probably grumbling impatiently and nervously.

"What in the world are we doing here?"

All this waiting around is driving me up the wall!

There's no use. He's gone and without Him, we are nothing. It's over!

We might as well face up it. What is this Holy Spirit business anyway? Maybe we misunderstood Him.”

Just then they heard a sound.

The breath of God began to blow on that place like the rush of a mighty wind.

Images of fire danced around them.

Suddenly, their fear was gone, replaced by peace and confidence, courage and strength and unity and they began to speak and communicate the word of God boldly and amazingly people from all different backgrounds heard and responded and 3,000 people were converted that day. So the story goes.

It is interesting to note that the three classic symbols for the Holy Spirit in the Bible remind us of how God works *through us* and how God works *from the inside out*.

Do you remember what they are?

The three traditional symbols of the Holy Spirit in the Bible:

Breath: the symbol of Life.

Fire: the symbol of Power.

And the descending dove: the symbol of Peace.

Let's take a look at these one at a time.

First, there is *breath*, the symbol of life and vitality.

Remember in the Garden of Eden when God created Adam and Eve, He shaped them, but they were lifeless until He breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. They did not really come alive until He breathed His spirit into them.

Again, we see it here at Pentecost.

The Breath of God, like the rush of a mighty wind, blew upon that place... and the disciples came alive.

A few nights ago I was watching a Premier League football game on television. After the game, the manager of the losing team was being interviewed. He was not happy with the way his team had played and he said, "We deserved to get beaten because we were absolutely listless out there tonight. We had no drive, no emotion. We had no life at all!" And then he said, "*We had no spirit!*"

This, of course, is just a saying. Still, it made me think of how many people go through life spiritually, namely: listless with no zest, no commitment, no drive, and no fervour. Without spirit.

Hymn writers of all times recognised the importance of this and wrote words like these:

*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.*

The first sign of the Holy Spirit in the Bible is *breath*... the symbol of Life and zest and vitality.

The kind of life created only by the presence of God.

First, there is breath, the symbol of life.

Second, there is *fire*, the symbol of power.

We often put those two words together, don't we?

We talk about firepower.

In the Bible, fire is often used as the symbol of God's presence and power. For example, we see it in the burning bush of Exodus and again here in the New Testament story of Pentecost.

Power can be abused and it often is.

I don't want to give a list of examples. It is not necessary.

And although I am not a fan of telling jokes in sermons and I think it should not be done in general. I will today break my own rule and tell you one that I came across while preparing this sermon. It illustrates my point quite well and I found it funny. So, here it goes:

There was a man who had been suffering with a headache for several days.

Finally, he went to see a doctor. However, the duty nurse who looked and acted like a Drill Sergeant at Sandhurst greeted him gruffly.

When he told her about his headache, she barked in a loud stern voice: "Go into that examination room, take off your clothes and put on this hospital gown.

The doctor will be there in a few minutes."

The man protested, "But listen," he said. "I really don't need to go through all that. I just have this chronic headache."

To which the nurse answered, "Sir, did you hear what I said? You go into that examination room and put on that hospital gown right now!"

And so the man did.

When he got into the room and closed the door, he discovered another man already sitting in there wearing a hospital gown.

The man with the headache said to the other one, "This is ridiculous. I don't know what on earth I'm doing in here. This is crazy. I just have a headache."

The other man said, "You think you've got problems. I just came in here to read the meter!"

Now that nurse had power, didn't she?

But that is not the kind of power I am talking about.

Not the power of brute force or blatant intimidation, not the power of political clout or wealth or weapons.

But rather the power of knowing God's presence in our lives, and what that presence can produce: integrity, honesty, and commitment to a great cause.

The sense of being God's co-worker, the assurance of God's love, there is nothing stronger than that.

That is the firepower of Pentecost that fuels and mobilises and energises us and that enables us to do great things.

Being totally convinced that God is with us and for us and that He will ultimately win, that nothing, not even death, can separate us from him.

There is incredible power in that.

In the novel Barabbas, a Christian named Sahak is brought before the Roman governor because he refuses to renounce his God and this dialogue takes place:

Roman Governor: "If you renounce your God, no harm shall come to you.

Sahak: "I cannot."

Roman Governor: "Why not?"

Sahak: "I cannot deny my God."

Roman Governor: "Extraordinary man... surely you must be aware of the punishment you force me to sentence you to. Are you really so brave that you can die for your God? Is not life dear to you?

"Yes," answered Sahak, "it is."

Roman Governor: "But if you do not forswear this God of yours, if you do not renounce your God, nothing can save you. You will lose your life.

“Yes,” answered Sahak, “But I cannot lose my God!”

Do you know what Sahak was saying? He was saying “I have the fire power of Pentecost!

Many early Christians died as martyrs because they refused to renounce God. Their faith was strong and so was their will. Difficult to understand for us today, but still admirable.

Third and finally, there is the descending dove, the symbol of peace.

The early Christians, in creating this symbol, were very wise to show the dove descending, because peace does indeed come from above.

Inner peace, the poise, the serenity, the courage, the confidence to meet life and its troubles with steady eyes comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Three times in the past few weeks, I have been reminded of this.

Three different conversations with three different people revealed vividly the peace that comes from having faith and trust in God:

- A young couple facing a nightmare experience beyond description in the sudden illness of their baby,

- An older couple dealing with the bad news of a medical report and considering their alternatives,

- A heartbroken woman grappling with the abrupt loss of the man who had been her husband for over 50 years,

... and all of them displaying a peace that passes understanding, a peace that comes only from their trust in God.

That is the good news of our faith and the message of Pentecost: God is with us right now working from the inside out, giving us the Breath of Life, the Fire Power of Commitment and the Peace that passes all understanding. Amen