

St Marc Grenoble

Sunday 28th May 2023, Pentecost

John 20 19 - 23

Psalm 104: 26 - 37

Acts 2: 1 - 21

'Peace be with you'

Good morning and welcome, whether you are here or joining by Zoom. **Let's PRAY**

Today is Pentecost. Probably THE most exciting and life changing celebration in our Christian year - indeed, in our Christian history.

Why is it called Pentecost? Pentecost literally means 'fiftieth', and Pentecost - or the Feast of Weeks, as it's called in the Jewish Calendar, comes fifty days after the Feast of Firstfruits, which is celebrated on the first day of the week (Sunday) after Passover which is when we celebrate Easter – so, Pentecost is always on the Sunday 50 days from Easter Day.

But, before I get started, let me explore your response to today's readings; what did you notice, what jumped out at you?? ... Thank you!

In the Church calendar, it's the end of Easter season today; and the annual cycle which celebrates Jesus' earthly ministry, which began in Advent, last December.

The Pentecost story marks the start of a new phase in the life of the early Christian church; of which now 2,000+ years later, we continue to be part. In fact, many scholars consider the Pentecost event as the real beginning of the Christian church.

The events of Pentecost were the public fulfilment of Jesus' gift to His disciples, which we heard in our Gospel reading (John 20: 19 - 23), when Jesus breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

Our Gospel reading (which we heard first, so that we could appreciate the timing of events) has a couple of important things for us to consider before we move on.

First, John's description of the time, which I've mentioned before - 'On the evening of that day, the first day of the week,' Straight away that should ring a bell, John's code is telling us: 'there is something new about to happen here'. Interesting, because we could be tempted to think this meeting was an ending, a goodbye, rather than a beginning. But actually Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit to His disciples marks the start of the new phase of Jesus' ministry on earth - fulfilment of His commission to the disciples (and us!), to take over as the 'spearhead' of proclaiming the Gospel.

Jesus told His disciples (including us). He would send another helper - the Spirit of Truth who will live with us forever. We have the assurance that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will always be with us.

At the time, they had no real idea what Jesus was talking about; but, after the events of Pentecost, they were left in no doubt. Jesus promised He will not leave us bereft; and the dramatic arrival of the Holy Spirit verifies and endorses that promise.

The Pentecost events ‘kicked off’ in the ‘upper room, where the disciples had first met Jesus after His resurrection. Jesus told them not to leave Jerusalem, but wait for the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor and Comforter, whom the Father had promised.

Jesus also made another earth shattering comment: v.23: If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. ‘If you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.’ That gives us a startling dual responsibility: The privilege of offering forgiveness, but also the prerogative of withholding forgiveness; which is definitely a very scary responsibility.

So, at the start of the Acts reading, we’re told the Disciples “were all together in the same place”. It seems there were many more than just Jesus’ immediate disciples - men and women were there, possibly as many as 120 people, packed together.

They were hiding, hoping, waiting, praying, expecting something, or someone; sharing fellowship and eating together ... Suddenly there was a total surprise – a *noise* like the sound of a strong wind, coming from heaven, filled the whole house where they were sitting. We’re told about the sound, but there’s no suggestion of an actual wind. The original word used - *Ruach*, actually means both wind and spirit.

Tongues, apparently of fire, appeared among them, moving apart and coming to rest on each of them. The Holy Spirit was spreading among them and we’re told:” ‘They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the words to say. Imagine the hubub??

There was so much noise and commotion, it attracted a large crowd of people, who came to see what all the noise was about and find out what was happening.

This group of uneducated men, from Galilee, were speaking in all kinds of different languages. People from all over the Jewish world – heard and understood the Good News about Jesus, in their own native languages. There’s no way the disciples would have known these languages – but they were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Imagine the amazement and excitement as people realised what was happening. In v. 12 We’re told ‘Everyone was astonished and perplexed’. ‘What does this mean??’ they were asking each other

The disciples were ecstatic at this amazing sign of God’s power, which descended from heaven. It confirmed, and guaranteed, that Jesus had ascended to His rightful place at the right hand of God the Father.

It was the beginning of something completely new. Nothing would ever be the same again! The Holy Spirit was drawing people out of their own private concerns, to consider each other’s needs; and was transforming all of them. They had a communal experience; it was the start of building a new ‘church’ community - worshipping Jesus and being empowered by the Holy Spirit to work together.

Of course, there were also sceptics who, because they couldn’t understand the different languages, thought the disciples were drunk. That’s absurd, because when people are drunk, they’re usually much harder to understand.

But, on this occasion, it was easier for folk from all over the world to understand - they heard God's message in their own languages!

Then, Peter stood up and preached his first sermon – and he preached a remarkable sermon! He explained to the people where, in the Book of Joel, all these things were prophesied, hundreds of years earlier. Peter spoke with bold urgency; and what's even more amazing is that, we're told that about 3,000 people joined the church, and were baptised on that one day.

Whenever and wherever the Holy Spirit is involved, remarkable things happen (not always quite as visible and public); and people's lives are dramatically transformed! The Holy Spirit empowers and establishes all of us, if we invite Him - whoever we are, wherever we come from, and however marginalised we may feel.

The prophecy in Joel that Peter preached from (Joel 2: 28 – 32) tells us: God says 'In the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all people; your sons and daughters will prophesy; young men will see visions, old men will dream dreams; and God promises wonders in heaven and signs on earth.

The most exciting, and yet the most challenging thing in that prophecy is the final line, which says: '*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'.

That's a wonderful promise! It doesn't say 'everyone who's perfect', or 'everyone who's good'; it says 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord' **WILL** be saved.

If, like me, you feel weak, inadequate or have a fear of failure - Be encouraged! We are promised '*everyone*' who calls on the name of the Lord **WILL** be saved. God doesn't break His promises. We need to start **CALLING** on the Name of the Lord!!

However, as we listen to and reflect on the amazing events at Pentecost, there is a danger we'll concentrate more on **WHAT** happened, rather than **WHY** it happened.

Pentecost was the beginning of the Christian church, defining its character and showing its purpose: learning to work as a community empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on those disciples at Pentecost, as Jesus promised and as they'd been praying, to equip and empower them to be Jesus' witnesses as He'd instructed: "in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the world."

What does that mean for us - in our international, multilingual community??

It's a special promise; like Peter, we mustn't keep it to ourselves. We must share it! Here in St Marc's, we are also called to be Jesus' witnesses - 'to the ends of the world'! Although many of us (me included) are often frightened at the thought of being witnesses for Jesus even to the end of the street!

That is why Jesus promises us the Holy Spirit - to help, strengthen and equip us for His work. We must keep on praying for the Holy Spirit to empower us – every day!

I know many of us have experienced the Holy Spirit working in our lives? I have, on many occasions - not always in quite such spectacular and public ways. But, the Holy Spirit helps me do things, I never believed it would be possible for me to do.

Never be surprised, or frightened, when you feel the Holy Spirit working in your life. - In fact you should expect it! If we do God's will, He's promised the help of His Spirit.

Some people are nervous about asking for the Spirit's help; perhaps they're afraid they'll lose control - but that is never the case. The Spirit comes to help and strengthen, not to frighten or make us fearful.

If the work God asks you to do seems difficult, or uncomfortable, you can be sure you won't be alone if you do it. If you're in any doubt about that, read through the Book of the 'Acts of the Apostles' and learn about some of the amazing ways He transformed the growing church. Those stories are reassuring. I often feel inadequate or afraid of doing what God wants. But, I'm encouraged knowing the Holy Spirit is there to help - and all I need to do is ask!

God has a plan for each one of us. Although, of course, I have no idea what it is for you personally. That's between you and God!

This week, try and spend some unhurried time, in a quiet place, - read Acts chapter 2 again, then ask God to make clear what He wants you to do. But be aware it needs serious prayer, and careful listening to clearly understand.

If ever you need help with the prayer, or encouragement, or confirmation of what you think God is asking you, please ask for help - I will either spend some time with you myself, or suggest someone who I think will be able to help you.

What does this mean?

Now is the time for us all to pray - especially as we're seeking a new Pastor for this church - the most important thing is NOT to do nothing ... God has work for you to do; He is calling YOU - be sure YOU answer! No-one else can do it for you ...

Let's pray ...