

SERMON, 23 MAY 2021 – PENTECOST

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Yesterday we went on a steam train. The Welshpool and Llanfair Light Railway, my favourite. If you want an example of power, water, heated, under pressure, steam, pistons, wheels, movement. It's often said that a steam engine is the nearest thing a human has made to a living, breathing machine. Diesel or electric, you turn it on and it goes – steam, you have to work for the power, and it is so visible. I have never understood how a diesel engine works, but I can understand the power of steam.

These days very few of us have open fires, few of us have the pleasure of watching the flames dancing, feel the heat and the power, see the brilliance and the light. In churches we limit the flame to a candle – and if we're not careful, we limit the Spirit to a candle as well. Vicars rabbit on about the power of a candle flame to light up the darkness, but we don't want more than that.



A fire is something that destroys a shed, a school, a church – far too dangerous, let's stick to a controllable flame.

I'm never sure about a rushing, mighty wind either. Gentle breeze, can cope with that – rushing wind, no thanks. We're off to Orkney in less than a fortnight, and the one thing I do not want is a wind off the Atlantic. I am not a good sailor, and the Pentland Firth in a storm is my idea of hell. The wind that gently turns the mill or the wind turbine – very good, but wind you can't

control, and many a miller lost his sails in a storm. How often do we limit the Holy Spirit, a gentle, warming breeze, not the wind that blows where it will.



artist unknown

Yet Pentecost was not a day that human beings could control. The disciples had been through seven weeks of turbulence. They had believed in a man with a message, and walked beside him as he rode into Jerusalem. They had been excited by the crowds, and devastated when their leader was arrested. They had known the depths of despair, most of them couldn't even face going to the cross and being with Jesus as he died – this was the end.

Easter Sunday morning, the rumours started to flow. Some of them had seen the empty tomb, then they had met Jesus – but he wasn't quite as he had been – and they had to get their heads around the fact that this was different, and that God was working, but not how they expected. Perhaps the Upper Room was their safe space, perhaps that is where they were.



Jen Norton

And suddenly there is a power like nothing they have known before. We've heard the story many times, can we imagine the fear as a mighty wind and fire appeared among them? Looking for pictures to illustrate this for the Zoom service, it is all very genteel.

Then somehow these men feel full of the Holy Spirit, and the power is manifesting itself as they speak, not in their own tongues, but in other peoples. As the Spirit seems to take over their vocal chords, and their brains – we'd use the image "reprogramming", but that's 21st century, not first. Something was happening – and if you've ever experienced someone speaking in tongues, it is

incredibly frightening. You cannot control it, you can't understand it, a power greater than you is at work.



Edgardo de Guzman

The crowd gathers, this can't be kept secret, it needs to be spoken, and it can be spoken in languages that everyone can understand. "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia" – well done, Louise/John – this gospel, this good news, is for everyone. It is fascinating to imagine how all these people were affected, and how they took the good news back across the Roman Empire.

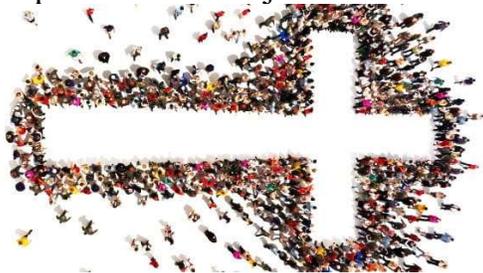
But first they need to understand. Peter is the one who explains. "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams'".

The crowd in Jerusalem are religious men and women, they are in Jerusalem because it is a Festival, they are there, celebrating their history, heritage and faith. They are there, in a City overseen by Rome, wanting God, their God, to transform their lives and their faith. No doubt some of the crowd has stood and listened to Jesus just a few weeks earlier, no doubt some of them had seen the miracle worker at work, some, no doubt, still wondered whether Jesus was the Messiah. Peter is convinced, and he is convincing. Listen, follow, and the Spirit will come upon you – faith makes a difference, believe. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."



I come from the Christian tradition where you are either “saved” or you’re not. In or Out – and if you are not “In” then it is my job to get you “in”. The Evangelical wing of the Church of England puts the emphasis on mission and evangelism, that we are here first and foremost to make converts, to bring people in.

Don’t get me wrong, I want people to find a lively Christian faith. In my 58 years of life, I have been blessed beyond measure by having a faith. It has challenged me, sustained me, invigorated me, and given me a purpose to my life. My church family, families, in so many different places, and men and women who have challenged me, sustained me, delivered casseroles to the door when I was grieving and incapable of looking after myself, let me share in their joys and sorrows, given me friendships that are so deep, and made my life what it is. I am so blessed (and I mean that, even if sometimes I moan about you all). My relationship with Jesus is that of a friend, someone I can talk to, pray to, experience, worship – and in his house, lots of his houses, in these wonderful churches, I find peace, beauty, inspiration, and so much else. I want other people to come and join us.



I do believe we have so much to offer. There is a level of friendship, love and care in churches you don’t often find outside. It’s not perfect – we still have church people who will snarl at a noisy child or make someone who’s different feel excluded – but I do believe life is better if you worship. There is an amazing amount of care, love and faith in so many churches, and I want people to come and experience it.

It makes me so frustrated when a family comes to bury ashes, and yet they didn’t use the church for the funeral, and none of them show any interest in the life and work of this place, or the faith we try and profess. It makes me frustrated when we have a wonderful wedding, and I get a gorgeous “thank you” card, and that’s it. It makes me sad that, across this country, the next decade will see beautiful churches mothballed or closed because the people in the villages that surround them have no interest in supporting them.

I was told the other day, that I mustn’t worry. That the Spirit is blowing through the churches, that the old and traditional will be destroyed, and God will work in a new and dynamic way. Yes he will, yes he is – but he is also working in the

old ways, with the people on the fringe, with those who don't have a Christian faith but still seek to build a better world – God is at work.



We've seen it this last year – who would have believed that we could have meaningful worship in front of a computer, but we have. We've seen it in love and care and sacrifice – and in laughter and human companionship.

None of us must limit the Spirit to what we feel comfortable with, but the Spirit is the Comforter – and in that faith, in the power of the Spirit, we serve our communities, we care for each other, through a pandemic and (we hope and pray) out the other side. Amen.