



# Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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## Today's reading

### Acts 2: 1–21 (“The coming of the Holy Spirit”)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

- 1 *I am the Church!* (CH:204)
- 2 *Holy Spirit, gift bestower* (CH:590)
- 3 *She sits like a bird* (CH:593)
- 4 *The Church’s one foundation* (CH:739)
- 5 *Like fireworks in the night the Holy Spirit came* (CH:584)

# In the Name of the Father and of

*With Robin at the General Assembly, this week's preacher is Jim Couper:*

**O**ur Pentecost reading from the Book of Acts is a wee bit of a tongue twister in places – particularly places – Cappadocia, Phrygia, Pamphylia. I'm obliged to Michael Palin for knowing how to pronounce Cappadocia.

The story in the first part of the second chapter of the Book of Acts splits into three scenes. Scene One: the apostles have gathered early in the morning “together in one place” in a room of a house in Jerusalem. And then it happens! The sound like a storm gust of wind. (One of the things a student pilot is taught is to be wary of dark black clouds and never to get underneath one. Even if there doesn't seem to be much wind, if there's a black cloud hovering, then, all of a sudden, there can be a very powerful down-draught of wind – a storm gust which comes out of the cloud and is very often followed by heavy rain.)

And then! An amazing wonder: tongues of flames appeared, and it seems that a flame rested on each person. And then! They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.

Now comes Scene Two in the story. And it happens outside the house. Perhaps the house bordered a public square. The disciples came pouring out of the house speaking in many languages and this remarkable happening soon draws a crowd.

And finally comes Scene Three. People scoff and say the disciples are over-refreshed, as we douce Scots might delicately put it. A well-known politician was once said, by a witty journalist, to be tired and emotional. So, Peter stands up and speaks up to the crowd. He is said to be standing with the other eleven disciples. Just before this story in Acts chapter 1 we are told that the place vacated by Judas, by then dead, had been filled by Matthias.

We all have different approaches to the miracle stories in the Bible and especially to those in the New Testament. I find I am quite relaxed about miracle stories. I go along with my favourite theologian – how that rolls off the tongue – my favourite theologian Marcus Borg.

Some ten years ago, Robin led a group of us for a weekend conference in St Mark's Church in Sheffield and Marcus Borg was the main speaker. He was very good – we all thought so – and I find him inspirational.

I might just mention a humorous wee episode that happened on the way back. In the evening, now quite dark, we were coming up the A1. We were cruising along in my car and somehow, between them, the driver and navigator managed to mislay the A1, and we found ourselves meandering in the blackest of nights in the outer wastes of Northumberland. It was only because of the uncanny sense of direction of a back-seat passenger that we eventually found the A1. Else, our whited bones would now be lying on a moor beyond Hadrian's Wall. Oh, well – it makes a good story and, as someone said quite recently, “Recollections may vary ...”

Marcus Borg says some stories may not be literally true, but they are really true. So, for our three scenes, my belief might be like this. Scene One: Gust of wind? Yes. Tongues of fire? Yes ... (a bit hesitantly). Scene Two: Speaking in tongues? Er, I doubt it. One could develop all kinds of explanations about how it was that there seemed to be many languages. For example, just as today, many if not most educated people all over the world speak English; so, in those days, in that part of the world, many people spoke Greek.

If the disciples were saying something really significant there would be many round about who could translate into Greek, and so, many more who got the gist. It's interesting that we are not told what the disciples are speaking about. Naturally we assume that they are speaking about Jesus as Peter goes on to do immediately afterwards.

# the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

It's also interesting that the story says "other languages" – it does not say anything about unknown languages. There are Christians today for whom speaking in tongues means falling into trance-like states, or even something like a convulsive fit, and babbling forth in an unknown holy language. There is a word for this: glossolalia. We are all entitled to our own beliefs. It does not seem to me, on careful reading of this passage in the Book of Acts that anything of that kind is being described or implied.

But what is language anyway? If I say the word "dog" you will form a vague, or maybe very precise, picture of a dog in your mind. If I say the word "*chien*" to a person who speaks French, they will likewise understand the same thing. And, very probably, any small child anywhere in the world may laugh if I say, "Woof!" In my household, alas, "woof" has a second connotation – being what is done to a plate of food if it comes anywhere near the house Labrador, which is how Ruth views me.

By the time the meaning of a word has entered our mind, the sound waves and neurological signals are vanished and in the mind is a picture. And, to press on with this, what is our mind anyway? What is light? The light of the tongues of flame, the light that communicates to our eyes and to our conscious mind a concept, a picture, a meaning. You will know that I am quite interested in all things scientific. I do rather draw the line at gore and guts. But my interest and knowledge is only that of an educated layman – superficial, you might say, no hard work of deep study for me.

I am currently of the view that science has no real basis for saying what is our conscious mind. What is it, in me, that is me? I see that my hand is not me. If I lost a hand – God forbid! – I would still be me. It seems quite clear to me that every cell of my body is a most wonderful biological machine. No individual cell has free will, takes ethical decisions or makes moral choices. Having been a computer programmer all my working life I know that a computer has no free will – it is a machine. But I am not a machine. I have free will. Free to make moral and ethical choices; free to choose to do good and not evil, to do right and not wrong. Free to choose to be open to the influence of the Spirit of God.

There are many scientists and philosophers who assert, in my view absurdly, that free will is a delusion and that we have none. I find their arguments verging on triviality. They say, "Free will would require something outside nature." To this the response is two-fold. Firstly, the laws of physics, as understood today, do not show that the universe is deterministic. And secondly, yes! Free will requires a soul. They find that absurd. To me it's obvious. And I observe that the free-will-is-a-delusion man carefully looks both ways when crossing a road.

Scene Three in our reading is a bit strange. Peter is quoting at length from the Book of the Prophet Joel in the Old Testament. It is reasonable to infer that Peter and the disciples thought that the end of days was nigh. Some scholars say that the early church was quite sure the end days were to come very soon – within a generation. Well, we've not encountered the apocalypse yet but there are several huge problems to hand ...

The main really true thing I take from this passage in Acts is that the Holy Spirit is real, and a tongue of flame sits upon us all. If our eyes are open, we can see the light of the flame – not in ourselves but in so many good people that surround us. And we must hope and pray that, now and again, they may see a wee flicker of the flame in us.

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.*

*Break us, melt us, mould us, fill us.*

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.*

Amen.

# Praying for others

Creator God,

You uphold everything that exists,  
and your Spirit breathes life into every living thing that ever was, is, or will be.

We ask for your Spirit's refreshment and reinvigoration.

We pray for all those who have felt the sadness of separation, or of personal loss,  
throughout the pandemic and restrictions of the last year.

Come once again Holy Spirit, blow on us this day,  
blow as a fire and rekindle us.

As restrictions that have held life back for so long ease,  
and new opportunities are now before us,  
help us to see with new eyes how important the gifts of daily life truly are,  
and the power of real connection with each other.

Descend on us Spirit of love.

May we grasp with eagerness, now more than ever before,  
the possibilities that lie before us.

Inspire us, we pray, to new life and love.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

## And finally . . .

*Abigail Morrison considers two steps forward...*

This week has seen us able to meet friends and family indoors – no more sitting under umbrellas, covered in rugs to enjoy a cup of tea with them. We've been able to hug them as well – what joy! We can go and meet people inside a café or restaurant and we can enjoy a tippie when we do, too.

Life is slowly beginning to change to something a bit more like we remember it before the pandemic and the lockdowns. But it is only changing for the better if you don't live in Moray or Glasgow. For nearly a fifth of Scotland's population, they still can't hug or meet inside or have a glass of wine with a meal out.

It seems that just when we think it's safe to go out again, another Covid variant strikes. The increased prevalence of the Indian variant in Moray and parts of Glasgow is causing concern. It sometimes feels like the journey out of this pandemic is two steps forward and one step back. Freedom beckons and then is postponed again.

But we are making progress. It looks like the vaccines will be effective against the new variants. Nearly three-quarters of the adult population of the UK has had one dose of the vaccine and over 40% both doses. Hopefully we will keep on top of the spread of any new variants. And hopefully the vaccines will mean very few of us get really ill if we do catch Covid. But I suspect we will have to get used to a back-and-forth, stuttering path out of lockdown and into a more normal life.

Better than no path out at all.