

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Acts of the Apostles 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

Come, Holy Spirit, come! (CH594; vv. 1, 5, 6)

Like fireworks in the night (CH584)

Breathe on me, breath of God (CH596)

For your gift of God the Spirit (CH603)

The second chapter of Acts offers its readers a very dense and complex set of stories which make us think, and feel and wonder. It starts off with confusion reigning, as people from all parts of the known world hear the Christian believers talking in the languages, not of those speaking, but in the languages of those listening. So confusing is this story, that this minister positively needs to have his Bible open in front of him when writing a Pentecost sermon, just to make sure that the story is told properly and without mistakes.

Interestingly though, by the end of that same second chapter of Acts we find the infant Church getting down to serious business with the love of God and neighbour right at the heart of what they are doing. (And if you come out to Gladsmuir's "Sing at 6.30" service tonight you will hear a whole lot more about the Church of Pentecost and the influence it has had on the Church of modern times.)

The Day of Pentecost happened, of course, just as Jesus had said would. After his death and Resurrection, he would ascend to his heavenly Father, who in time would provide "another" for the friends of Jesus who had been left behind. This other would be an advocate; a comforter; a strengthener; a challenger. But who precisely would this "other" be? What exactly would this "other" do?

How all of this would happen, no-one knew. But when it did happen, surely no-one could have been in any doubt. For the believers, Pentecost was something big, something special, something never to be forgotten. Pentecost is about fresh beginnings: often viewed as the very date of birth of the church. There is something in the idea of the day of Pentecost changing everything for the followers of Jesus, so recently left on their own, but now joined by God in a new way: a church-arriving way, a church-nurturing way which would lead on to an amazing future.

The second chapter of Acts is of real significance because in this second chapter of Acts, everything changes. God's ancient, immortal Holy Spirit comes to the believers in Jerusalem, and suddenly they are rejuvenated - somehow galvanised - into action. Yes, the Church is born, though not as a book-based institution with a nice story to tell. Nor as a fan club for Jesus, with a wonderful memory to recall and a tremendous example to uphold.

The Church is born as a strange amalgamation of odd souls: a movement of believers who are led by nothing less than God's presence with them. Jesus of Nazareth is no longer there in flesh and in blood, but he is as good as his word: God has sent another.

Needless to say, this is all very confusing. We can grasp the notion of God without too much difficulty, reflecting (as we often do) upon what we so often call "the heavenly Father". This is God the Maker, God the Sustainer, God the Boss. Things perhaps get a little more complex with Christmas and the arrival of God Incarnate, there in human form. The shorthand we have for this may seem a little confusing, but "God the Son" just about makes sense to us: Jesus Christ sent from heaven to live a brief human life, leaving a divine mark upon our earth and our experience.

But now we need to add another divine element to God the Father and God the Son, because in Pentecost the ever-present Spirit of God moves into our human realm and our human experience, not just doing so person by person, but in a much more communal sense. All very theological, so it's time, I think, to wheel in a biblically-minded theologian to make some sense of all this. And who better to help us than New Testament scholar, Marcus J. Borg, who has these timely words of wisdom concerning what it was that the believers encountered in their Pentecost experience:

“They continued to experience the same Spirit – the Spirit of God – they had known in and around [Jesus of Nazareth] during his historical lifetime. This is the central meaning of Pentecost: the Spirit that had been present in Jesus returned to his community of followers. They also continued to experience the same power they had known in Jesus: the power to heal, change lives, and create a new form of community. They spoke of life ‘in Christ,’ in the living Jesus.”

Back in November 2011 a group of elders and members of the church journeyed south to the great city of Sheffield to attend a conference staged by a charity called the Progressive Christianity Network. And who was the guest speaker? None other than the just quoted biblical scholar, Marcus J. Borg. It really was an excellent couple of days, with much wisdom being offered and received. But at the end of the conference the organisers threw in an added bonus for us: a question time with the bold professor. This, I thought, was too good an opportunity to miss, so I spent some time crafting exactly “the right question” (from my point of view at least). When the time came, my anonymised question - a clever, clever question of which I was really rather proud - was read out by the chairman, and it ran something like this: “Is there a difference between the post-Ascension Christ and the post-Pentecost Holy Spirit?”

That question of mine (astute and rapier-sharp as it so plainly was) had obviously made a big impression on Borg, as he stood there, staring down at the floor thinking deep, professorial thoughts. He was absolutely motionless as he cogitated and processed and pondered. Statuesque in his appearance, he continued thinking his deep, deep thoughts for quite a few seconds more until - at last - he looked up, opened his mouth and gave us the answer I had been waiting for: “No.”

Not the wisdom I might have been craving, though he did have the kindness to expand upon that one-word answer at quite some length. And, if nothing else, that Q&A session taught me something about the danger of asking “closed questions”.

Borg’s line on all of this can be summed up in the idea of God’s Holy Spirit being - we might say - “mobile”: capable of permeating Jesus, his words and his actions, yet also capable of permeating the Church of Jesus Christ. As Borg said: “... the Spirit that had been present in Jesus returned to his community of followers.”

For 2000 years, God’s Holy Spirit has worked through the Church: a human grouping with human failings and human weaknesses. Still, despite all the shortcomings of the Church and its members, we do genuinely believe that this is a Spirit-filled body which is of God: the Body of Christ. Through the ups and downs of 20 centuries, enduring schisms and splits and reformations, enduring prejudice and injustice, enduring lavish human self-indulgence and appallingly human sinfulness, still (in spite of it all) the Church has spread through all the world ... in part because of its believers’ beliefs, yet also at points in spite of us.

2000 years on, we still believe that the Church of Jesus Christ is not of human making, simply because it remains the Church that is deployed by God, enabled by God, fed by God. So, never, never underestimate the power of God to work in new and amazing ways, albeit ways which we might not yet fully comprehend.

Prophetic words from the Book of Joel, echoed for us today in the Book of Acts: “I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Yours sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will proclaim my message.” Amen.

Praying for others

Come, Holy Spirit, come to our world, to our Church, to our hearts.

We pray for your Church throughout the world: for all who gather in your name, in cathedrals and chapels, in homes and in the open air.

May your Spirit unite us in faith, kindle in us the fire of your love, and equip us to speak your word with boldness and grace.

Come, Holy Spirit, renew your Church.

We pray for our nation and the nations of the world:

for those in positions of power and leadership,

for those caught in the grip of war, injustice, or fear.

In particular we pray for the desperate situation in Gaza.

May your Spirit bring courage and wisdom to world leaders and decision-makers, peace where there is conflict, and hope where there is despair.

Come, Holy Spirit, bring justice and peace.

We pray for those in need today: the sick, the sorrowful, the anxious, and the weary.

We remember those who grieve, and all for whom this day brings pain.

In the silence, we name before you those who are on our hearts: *[silence]*

Come, Holy Spirit, bring comfort and healing.

Breathe upon us again. Inspire us to live generously, speak boldly, and serve faithfully that, through us, others may come to know your love.

Gather all our prayers, spoken and unspoken, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

"Sing at 6.30": Gladsmuir Church's third "big sing" service of the season takes place this Sunday (8th May) at half past six. Everyone is warmly invited to join in an evening of praise as we celebrate Pentecost. Our retiring offering will be for Christian Aid Scotland.

Jars of Grace 2025 for Rwanda: It is wonderful to report that our appeal to benefit the charity Christian Engineers in Development has raised exactly £4,000, enabling work to begin in July on a 40,000 litre water tank for Rwanda. CED's Treasurer, David Beak, sent us this message: "Please pass on the grateful thanks of all those involved with the work of CED to the congregations of both churches for their amazing support and generosity towards this project. The project is being led on behalf of CED by Angus Armstrong who plans to visit Rwanda next month to start the construction work on the tanks (phase 1). I am sure that Angus will keep you updated regarding progress in the months to come. Once again a huge thank you to you all for your invaluable support." Well done to all who gave!

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Wednesday Club: From 2.30-4pm in Room 2, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities and tea/coffee.

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from 10.30am - 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.