

ACTS 2:1-21  
KEEPING IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT

Pentecost is a big day in the life of the Church. It is the start day, the day when God poured out His spirit on the Church and gave the Church its life. This is the day when it all began; the birthday of the Church. It was a really special day in the life of the friends of Jesus and the story is full of pictures to show something of how special it was; it sounds like the wind, it looks like fire; people heard the gospel in their own language. Wind suggests that the power of God is at work here; fire is all about the holiness of God; the languages suggest that the gospel is universal in its scope – the gospel of Jesus is for everyone. It is a special day to go along with Christmas and Easter – these are the great things that God has done in the world and we celebrate God’s wonders today! The Spirit is with us, He lives in us and we don’t always understand what we can’t see, but Jesus lives in us. This great one-off event is something to celebrate.

I want to take a look today at what went before and after Pentecost. These great events don’t just happen on their own, but there are things that go on beforehand and afterwards. This week we have been celebrating the 75th anniversary of D-Day as the day which shaped the direction of the Second World War, but D-Day didn’t just happen on its own: there was a before and after to make the important day work. Preparation for D-Day went on for months before it actually happened: there were troops massing in the South of England, equipment was being gathered; the day itself was supposed to be June 5th, but the weather forecast was poor, and that preparation just wasn’t right; there was a story this week of a weather forecaster who persuaded the Army chiefs to wait for 24 hours. As well as the forces who landed on D-Day there were one million others waiting to follow them once the beaches had been secured, more men and equipment was to come after to take the fight on into France. If the preparation had not been right and had there been no follow-up, then D-Day not have had the impact that it had.

The Day of Pentecost has three themes to it. First, it is Jesus’ last act in His saving ministry: He has done His miracles, He has gone to the cross, God has raised Him and now He pours out His spirit on the Church, on His disciples; the Spirit is His Spirit who will glorify Jesus and help people to believe in Jesus. Second, Jesus is keeping His promises: that He would give His Spirit to His friends was a promise that God has made hundreds of years before and that Jesus has repeated; He would give His spirit and Pentecost is Jesus keeping that promise. Thirdly, this is the beginning of a new era, the start of a new phase in the mission of God in the world, when the Church is given power, when the Church is equipped to be God’s people in the world and to do the mission for which Jesus has called them and on which Jesus has sent them; this is a new start and by God’s power they will be able for task. This is what took place on the day of Pentecost itself and we celebrate all of that and rejoice and thank God for His Spirit in us today.

What happened before Pentecost? There was a gap, 50 days from Easter. After 40 days, Jesus went back to heaven, on what we call Ascension Day, the story we read in Acts chapter 1. There was a 10 day gap between that day and this. Jesus told disciples “*Do not...*” (Acts 1:4) “Wait!” I wonder what that conjures up in your mind. “Wait!” Someone sitting around all day doing nothing, just waiting to see what’s going to happen? One thing about being in Hospital, you spend a lot of time waiting for someone to come, waiting for something to happen! Is that what the disciples were doing? Were they sitting around all day twiddling their thumbs, doing nothing but looking to the sky? Well, no!

They were attending to business. A new leader needed to be found to replace Judas and so they found Matthias, and appointed him. But most of all, they prayed: *“they all joined...”* (Acts 1:14) They waited and they prayed. Prayer was a key for the disciples: time and again we read in Acts of important moments and the disciples prayed; but not just at important moments, because they reflected Jesus by a regular practice of prayer. Prayer was the way by which they expressed their dependence on God; they knew that they couldn't do this on their own and needed God's grace and help, so they prayed. As they waited for Pentecost, and because Jesus had told them, they waited in Jerusalem and as they waited they prayed.

We don't know what they prayed but it doesn't take much imagination. If they were anything like me, knowing that God has promised, they would be praying for God to keep His promise. Jesus has promised to give us His Spirit; *“wait till the Spirit comes!”* Still, they pray for God to keep His promise; they believe, but perhaps there is just a nagging little doubt in the back of their mind; they know that God keeps His promises, but there is still something in them that doubts; so their prayer would be for God to keep His promises. Our faith is promise-based: God has promised to bless the world, to forgive our sins, to be with us always and everywhere, to save us completely, to build His Church, and these promises are there for us to stand on and believe; but we still pray that God will keep His promises. There is still something in us that says *“maybe God will forget and we need to remind Him”* and so we pray; that prayer is an expression of our faith, trusting in His promises. Pentecost is God fulfilling His promise of the Spirit!

I think they would also be praying that they live up to the gift that God gives. They might well be praying to be able to be the kind of people that God wants, to be able to do the mission to which Jesus has called them. They see their weakness; they know that that were not up to the task on their own strength, they confess their fears and pray that God will help them. Time and again the church in Acts repeats that prayer for help when life is hard, when there are tough choices to make, when people are against them and the church's days seem numbered, when they struggle to confess that Jesus is Lord in an alien world. Looking ahead to these mission-challenges before Pentecost, the disciples pray they will be up to task. We have mission-challenges today: being a Christian in an alien environment, how to be church when many people think the church is useless, how to put our mission action plan into practice, personal difficulties – will we be up to the task? So we pray; we need to pray; we confess our fears and ask God for help; we pray that He will equip us and help us. Pentecost is God equipping His Church for these mission-challenges. Before Pentecost, they are waiting, they are praying!

What happened after Pentecost? *“Let us...”* (Galatians 5:25) A mother was watching her son as part of a group of new recruits to the army and they were *“marching”* through the town on parade before going off to war and as she watched she was heard to say *“they're all out of step but our Jock!”* Paul paints a picture of Christians walking through the world following Jesus and the Spirit is walking alongside us and our task is to keep in step with the Spirit. In Galatians chapter 5 he writes about how hard that is, that there is a battle going on for our souls: on one hand, all our human instincts, tainted by sin are pulling us in one direction towards jealousy, ambition, envy, orgies and so on, while on the other hand, the Spirit of Jesus in us is pulling us in the other direction. Paul lists nine personal qualities that are the fruit of the Spirit's work and influence in us and in our character: *“The fruit...”* (Galatians 5:22) These are personal qualities that the Spirit of Jesus would produce in us, the kind of people He wants us to be; we can't pick and choose the best or the easiest, but we need all of them. This was the challenge for the disciples after Pentecost, to be the right kind of people and to be more and more like Jesus. The Spirit walked with them and they were to keep in step.

That challenge has not gone away; it is the same challenge for us as we live in the days after Pentecost! There are other Bible passages that we could read that may seem to suggest more exciting ways in which the Spirit is at work in the Church, but without this piece, all these others are empty drums, making a lot of noise but having no substance. Here is by far and away the most important challenge and the hardest challenge for us after Pentecost. (2000 years is still "After Pentecost!") The challenge is to be the right kind of people. Here are nine qualities of the right kind of person: "*love, joy...*" (*Galatians 5:22f*) How do we measure up to these qualities? On a score of 1-10 for each, I wonder what you would give yourself? What would be your score out of 90? Would it be a pass mark? Or do we simply say "Could be better!"? Maybe that's all we need to say – we could be better at all of these qualities; we admire them and wish we had more of them. Pray that God will help us to be the right kind of people, pray that God will help us to keep in step with the Spirit! Why not make that your prayer of the week, every day asking God to help you keep in step with the Spirit, and see where that leads you!

Pentecost is a day worth celebrating: it is the start of the church, God's power poured out into the lives of Jesus' disciples, the Spirit given to the Church, never to leave! The disciples waited and prayed for God to keep His promise, prayed that they would be up to the task; the challenge for the rest of their lives to be the right kind of people, in step with the Spirit. We look for the Spirit to be at work in the Church today, inspiring people to worship and to become Christians and to live life in a Christian way. Wait and pray: pray for God to keep His promises, pray for the Spirit to be at work in us and through us. This is our mission-challenge: to be the right kind of people, people full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the qualities that the Spirit wants us to have, qualities the Spirit is at work in us to produce; keep in step with the Spirit, be the right kind of people. 2000 years on, we wait and pray; let us keep in step with the Spirit as He walks with us through life.