

Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry an act of devotion for individual or families
Sunday 23rd May 2021 at 10:30 am

Opening words

May the transforming Spirit of God, open our hearts and minds to new ideas and vision,
May the transforming Spirit of God, empower us to listen to marginalised voices and lives,
May the transforming Spirit of God, embolden us to create your Kingdom of justice and joy.
Every day. Starting now.

Opening Hymn R&S 303

Spirit divine, attend our prayers, and make this house your home;
Descend with all your gracious powers; oh come, great Spirit, come.

Come as the light, reveal our need, our hidden weakness show,
And lead us in those paths of life where all the righteous go.

Come as the fire and purge each heart like sacrificial flame;
Our soul a holy offering be to our Redeemer's name.

Prayer of Approach, Thanksgiving and Confession

We praise you Father, that the Holy Spirit was with you and with the Son, at the very start of creation, hovering over the chaos and potential of the material world, ready to bring life and human love into being. You have continued this work throughout history and even today - and so we are here in the presence of God, held, cared for and valued.

We praise you that you, in your community of Trinity, considered together, weighed up the immense risk and decided that the risk was worth it. And so we are here today, with life and love, with all their potential for good at our fingertips!

We praise you that, through Christ, you considered that the price required to bring us to a place of listening and expectant obedience, was worth paying. Through your death on the cross, not only us but the whole universe is reconciled to your purposes.

And Jesus, ascended to the Father now sends the Holy Spirit to his followers, that we might share, with courage and humility, the message of your love to the whole world. We are the hands, voice, feet and heart of the incarnate life that flowed in the veins of Jesus of Nazareth, for this time and for this hour in which we live.

O Lord, such a task is so far beyond us in all our limited vision, failure, weakness and selfishness! Renew us now as you send your Holy Spirit again on this new day of Pentecost, that we may be led into all your truth, inspired by all your truth and strengthened by all your truth, to serve your great purposes in this age in which we have been called to witness to your eternal and unchanging Love.

Readings



Psalm 104 - The Spirit of God is active in creation

John Chapter 15: 26 to Chapter 16: 15 - Jesus promises the Holy Spirit who will lead us into the Truth

Acts 2: 1-21 - The Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost and speaks through the Apostolic Church with fire

Romans 8: 22-27 - the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is an indication of the new world to come. He help us pray that world into being according to God's purposes.

Reflection by Rev. Stephen Orchard

Charles Wesley's great hymn begins, "Spirit of Truth, essential God..." Modern readers might start off on the wrong foot with this. The word "essential" is about things which are absolutely necessary. Recently it has been necessary to pare holiday luggage down to the essentials. But our sense of essential is derived from the meaning which Charles Wesley had in mind – 'of the essence': the Spirit of truth is of the essence of God from all eternity. The presence of God is as the air we breathe, essential, not as in something we need to secure for ourselves, but of the very essence of life.

Language is a blessing and a curse. Words help us to make things plain to one another and also lead us to obscure our meaning. Towers of Babel are still built, although now carrying a forest of aerials and satellite dishes so the speech of the whole world is both universal and confused. That ancient story carries theological significance, and is a wry commentary on human diversity. Confusion springs from our inability to identify the divine correctly. Our mistaken ideas about God lead to human estrangement. If we could live in harmony with God, the essential God in whom we live and move and have our being, then we would live in harmony with one another. We would know the truth and the truth would set us free.

On the day of Pentecost the apostles speak a language all can understand. Diverse people come to a common understanding. This follows the appearance of tongues like flames of fire among them. No-one familiar with Hebrew scripture can miss the significance of the sudden appearance of fire on the day of Pentecost. This is the lightning around Mount Sinai, the bush which burns perpetually, the chariot which carries Elijah away. In these days of health and safety and risk assessment our opportunities to observe flames in Britain are limited. Some of us are old enough to have sat by the hour observing the flames of a fire, especially when there was a power cut! We have no difficulty imagining tongues like flames of fire, because that was commonly how flames were seen and described. Today, in the pursuit of safety we have lost some of the sense of the dynamism of the flame. The Pentecost narrative goes beyond even the flames of our memories, for it puts these tongues of flame into the mouths of the Apostles, rather than decorously hovering above their heads, as often represented in art. Your frame of reference should be Isaiah's vision in the Temple, when an angel brings a flaming coal from the brazier and touches his lips, so that he may speak the word of God. You must have sung James Montgomery's words: *"O for the living flame from his own altar brought, to touch our lips, our minds inspire, and wing to heaven our thought!"*

Perhaps we have not always entered thoroughly into that prayer. Imagery apart, Isaiah found this purification of his lips both a blessing and a curse. For the Apostles, the gift of tongues to proclaim the Gospel to all nations was both privilege and burden. It is one thing to say the divine is all around us and to take comfort in the omnipresent God, whose mercy is everlasting. It is another thing to tune in to the energy of God and to offer our strength and our wills in conformity to God's purposes. For the apostles it led to exaltation, but also, within a few chapters, to imprisonment and persecution.

The sense of the essential God, the divine which is always at hand is heightened by the Pentecostal experience, but it is not confined to such times. Poets and artists best bring these truths to mind. Francis Thompson writes about the angels wings which beat on our doors if we only listened for them. Elizabeth Barrett Browning reminds us that every common bush is aflame with God, but we sit around and pick blackberries. But as our scientific imagination increased so we tended to push the divine to the edges of the universe as well as our personal experience. Clearly the essential God is to be found in the mysteries of time and space, but we cannot let science beguile us into worshipping a remote deity, let alone a God of the gaps, who provides an answer to the bits we can't work out. The essential God has to be intrinsic to all human experience, be it high science or my morning conversation with a neighbour.

On the Day of Pentecost Jews and Jews from the known world gathered in Jerusalem. Their attention is caught, not by the flames of fire, but by the noise of a group of Galileans speaking. So the Apostles were surrounded by pilgrims, people familiar with religious language and symbol. The first reaction of some of them is that the Apostles are drunk, which was presumably a more charitable

conclusion than saying they were mad or suffering delusions. Our own religious experience is not immediately comprehensible to those around us. At best they may simply say "What does it mean?" The Book of Acts introduces a further concept. Not only is God made accessible to simple Galileans but the whole Babel experience is reversed so that very different people understand one another.

This reversal is important because human attempts to understand God by sheer effort are doomed to failure. Our human refinements of religion often serve to drive us apart, dogmatism against conviction, sentiment against belief. Religion has been used to justify hatred and persecution throughout human history. There is an awful self-confirming belief, "I know what God says because he says it to me, so you're wrong". We easily lose sight that Christian belief is rooted in the Cross of Christ, in the conviction that surrender is the route to power, that love of God and neighbour are at the heart of life, and that we must therefore live in peace with all humanity. The human tendency to build the Babel of national and religious rivalries is overcome by the Spirit which calls us back to our essential being as children of one Father.

In our imagination we may try to imagine ourselves in the crowd on that first day of Pentecost. There are many great historic moments of which we might say, 'I would like to have been there.' The meeting of John Milton and Galileo in 1638 played its part in forming Milton's views on the free exchange of ideas unconstrained by church censorship. This is normally taken as the beginning of the liberal tradition of freedom of speech. This period in the seventeenth century was a time of theological innovation, the full consequences of which we have never fully grasped. Knowledge is a gift of the Spirit. Advances in knowledge and science in particular depend on creativity and the ability to go beyond the known and accepted. A conversation with an atheist friend, who insisted nothing existed which could not be physically demonstrated, underlined that life would be rather dull and probably impossible if we had no capacity to think beyond the immediate physical world surrounding us. He was convinced that I must believe what he believed I believed, if you see what I mean.

The act of creation carries risks. Science itself would come to a stop unless we believed that those risks are worth taking. This is, of course, fundamental to theology. Creation can go terribly wrong. So the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is subject to misunderstanding, as the New Testament and Christian history amply illustrates. We may take a mechanistic view of Creation that God, like a watch maker, knows what the finished article will look like. But true, faith requires belief that God has a purpose in Creation; Pentecost, and our doctrine of the Holy Spirit, free us from the assumption that the purpose of Creation is limited to what we now see and experience. Because theology is derived from scripture and tradition, where tradition is a variable factor, theology changes to take account of the growing body of human experience. Because an Augustine, an Aquinas, a Luther or a Calvin, opened up new theological perspectives, it does not mean that they have had the last word.

Can we seize the Pentecost moment which says the presence of God, though always acknowledged, carries a far deeper significance than yet realised in this moment? The essential God is not the prisoner of a religious system but fundamental to our changing perception of our world. What then, distinguishes Christianity from vague metaphysics? It is the Incarnation, the grounding of faith in Jesus of Nazareth. The message of Acts is not that one person's God is as good as another's and that all religious belief is valid. Quite the contrary. Christian belief teaches us to be humble, but not to bumble. It is our very belief in the teaching of Jesus which calls us to humble service to the world rather than triumphalist assertion of our dogmas. Peter who leads the Apostles into a world mission far beyond the limits of their tradition to that point, also knows the desolation of denying Jesus. Our very commitment gives us strength to be accepting. Strength in our convictions stops us getting defensive about them. So constant renewal of our inner core of belief, in prayer and worship and study, is part of the discipline of a Christian life, not to separate us out from the world, but to make us of some use to it and so be fulfilled. We celebrate at this festival the Spirit which energises us, which makes the scriptures plain to us, which is always pushing at the frontiers of our knowledge and experience, and which represents the God who is closer to us than our very selves.

Prayers of Intercession

Spirit of God show me Jesus, Remove the darkness, Let truth shine through!

Spirit of God show me Jesus. Reveal the fullness of His love to me.

Holy Spirit, who came to lead your people into all the Truth about Jesus, deepen and broaden our vision of what you are doing in the world and who you are reaching through Him.

May your Church, in all places and in all its diversity, rediscover and recognize the full range of your gifts and empowering, that we might declare the Gospel, in its entirety - to the entire world.

May your church travel deeper on pilgrimage into the heart of God, the Father and Creator of us all, that we may proclaim your good news, not only in words but in acts of love and compassion.

May the Holy Spirit, who is ever leading your people into new ways of seeing and understanding, lead us thereby, into new ways of being and serving that we might connect with the needs of the people of this age.

May the Holy Spirit, who brings the fruit of kindness, gentleness and peace heal the divisions of this world and bring peace and reconciliation to the places in our world where there is division and conflict: to your people Israel and their Palestinian neighbours, to Ukraine and Russia, China and Taiwan.

Holy Spirit, who makes the gift of reconciliation a reality as you lead us to Jesus, bring peace to the lines of difference in the ethnic make-up of Africa, and China and Myanmar, to the lines of difference in the political make-up of the USA, Northern Ireland and other places in the developed world, to the lines of difference in the economic make-up of a world looking forward to growth and release from lockdown captivity and those places, like India, where the struggle becomes more intense.

Holy Spirit, who binds God's people together in love, comfort and encourage us in our own needs as we pray for those who are on our hearts today and so we commend them to you for your comfort as they grieve, your help as they struggle, your healing as they suffer and your wisdom as they seek your will:

Spirit of God show me Jesus, Remove the darkness, Let truth shine through!

Spirit of God show me Jesus. Reveal the fullness of His love to me.

And so we pray for them as we bring our prayers in unity, saying with all your people...

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn

There's a spirit in the air, telling Christians everywhere:

'Praise the love that Christ revealed, living, working, in our world!'

Lose your shyness, find your tongue, tell the world what God has done:

God in Christ has come to stay. Live tomorrow's life today!

Still the Spirit gives us light, seeing wrong and setting right:

God in Christ has come to stay. Live tomorrow's life today!

May the Spirit fill our praise, guide our thoughts and change our ways

God in Christ has come to stay. Live tomorrow's life today!

Blessing

Go, in the power of the Holy Spirit

To bring blessing to those you meet

May you in turn be blessed by God

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

The eternal One in Three and Three in One.