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Service for Pentecost Sunday, 23rd May 2021

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP (Romans 8: 14-15)

Those who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. For the Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid. Instead the Spirit makes you God's children and by the Spirit's power we cry out to God "Father! my Father!"

HYMN: Immortal, invisible

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1 Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of
Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

2 Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might,
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness
and love.

3 To all life thou givest, to both great and
small.

In all life thou livest, the true life of all.
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish, but naught changeth
thee.

4 Great God of all glory, great God of all light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight.
All praise we would render; O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

Walter C Smith

PRAYERS

Let us pray

A prayer of thanksgiving

Blessed are you, Lord our God: in your love you create all things out of nothing through your eternal Word. We praise you and give you thanks.

Blessed are you, Lord our God: in your love you redeemed the world through our Lord Jesus Christ. We praise you and give you thanks.

Blessed are you, Lord our God: in your love you empower your people through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We praise you and give you thanks. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

Let us make our confession to God.

Holy God, we confess that we have rebelled against you and broken your law of love; we have not loved our neighbours nor heard the cry of the needy.

Forgive us, we pray, and free us for joyful obedience; through Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen.**

In Christ we are set free, through Christ we are forgiven. **Amen.** Thanks be to God.

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 2: 1-4, 43-47

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

2 When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. 2 Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. 4 They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak. 43 Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. 44 All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. 45 They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. 46 Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, 47 praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

HYMN: Holy Spirit, Truth divine

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1 Holy Spirit, Truth divine,
dawn upon this soul of mine.
Word of God, and inward Light,
wake my spirit, clear my sight.

2 Holy Spirit, Love divine,
reign within this heart of mine.
Be my law and I shall be
firmly bound, forever free.

3 Holy Spirit, Pow'r divine,
fill and nerve this will of mine.
By Thee may I strongly live,
bravely bear and nobly strive.

4 Holy Spirit, Peace divine,
still this restless heart of mine.
Speak to calm this tossing sea,
stayed in thy tranquillity.

5 Holy Spirit, Joy divine,
gladden thou this heart of mine.
In the desert ways I sing,
'Spring, O Well, for ever spring!'

Samuel Longfellow

SERMON: *Mr Michael Smith*

Change your ways... and God will give you the power of his Spirit. (Acts 2: 38)

If someone speaking from this pulpit were to refer to the 'four gospels', we would rightly assume that we are meant to be thinking about Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But there is perhaps a different way of thinking about this: what about Matthew, Mark, Luke and ACTS? The truth is that the Gospel of John is a much later work than the others and is quite different in purpose and presentation, with emphasis on reflection on the words and deeds of Jesus rather than straightforward narrative. The Acts of the Apostles, on the other hand, is Luke's second volume and carries on where his gospel leaves off. It is as if Luke is saying, firstly, "Here is an account of what Jesus did in his earthly life", and secondly, "This is what the followers of Jesus did afterwards, in his name and by his power and presence in their

lives". It is that power and presence we celebrate at Pentecost each year. It takes our message away from that of a long-dead hero and teacher whose example we reverently follow, and says "This man was the Son of God, who conquered death in his resurrection and was translated from the world of the flesh into the world of the spirit". Furthermore, he lives on and works within the human experience by re-creating his followers and empowering them to achieve through his presence those things which bring about the kingdom of God in the human story.

The 'Acts of the Apostles' is a remarkable record of the achievements of some very ordinary people who should really have been broken and scattered by persecution from the authorities after the political execution of their leader, Jesus of Nazareth. However, after an initial period of hiding and retreat, suddenly they reappear in the Temple and the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming their outrageous message of the resurrection of their Leader. Too absurd a claim to be taken seriously by the ruling authorities, you might have thought; why didn't they just let these fanatics have their say and then watch them disappear from the public scene? At least one Pharisee, Gamaliel, advised the High Council to do just that. On the other hand, Gamaliel continued, what if these men are not just fanatics, but truly are following a movement blessed by God, which the authorities should not be opposing at all? Allow time to let this become clear one way or the other, the Pharisee argued; and Luke says that time showed that what the apostles had started would not easily be stopped. The followers of Jesus were transformed from a motley crew to a caring community: sick people were healed; a system was created for the sharing of financial resources, each giving all he could so that no one went short; a welfare system was set up to protect the widows and orphans from becoming destitute; and always the proclamation made that Jesus was alive and working through them to effect these profound social changes. No wonder the apostolic community "enjoyed the favour of all the people", as our reading records. Despite arresting the leaders, murdering Stephen and sanctioning the repressive measures carried out by the Pharisee Saul, the authorities could do nothing to dismantle the community of those who believed themselves to be guided by "the Holy Spirit" – the spirit of Jesus himself.

Luke's second book describes an era that was exciting, new, vigorous and socially revolutionising. The subsequent history of the Church, if we believe the historians, has become less and less like the community of creative love which Jesus had in mind. Kings, Popes and self-seeking bishops fought each other for power and wealth, at the same time paying lip-service to a Christ who was not there; but alongside that there has always existed the church of the Holy Spirit: the real church, resting on the values of Jesus and energised by his presence in the hearts and minds of those who follow him. The historic Church may have lost its way, but this hidden Church, working away from the headlines, continues that process of redemption that God wanted all along.

Let's look at a couple of examples of this hidden church at work....

Firstly the monastic movement, setting forth the idea of a self-supporting community based on the social values of Jesus, serving the poor and sheltering the sick in what they called 'hospitals'; also preserving the ancient wisdom by faithfully copying the classic texts now

still available to us; taken over by greedy presbyters and massively dissolved for gain by Henry the Eighth, but still actively offering care to the disadvantaged in our own age – “seeing Jesus in the person of the sick”, to quote Mother Theresa of Calcutta – indeed, shaping our society over the years to pave the way for countless charities and such institutions as State education for all, the NHS and the Welfare State. Few people today would question the idea that giving to the needy is a good idea, and TV appeals bring in millions of aid from the pockets of ordinary people. If we ask, “Where did that come from?” the answer is firstly from Acts of the Apostles and then from the activity of the Holy Spirit in human society ever since.

Secondly, we are often dispirited by what some people call the ‘decline’ of the Christian Church, and the abandonment of faith and religious practice in our society. Disappearing congregations, closing churches and a shortage of Ministers and leaders of worship are of course a matter for concern, but despair can never be the right thing if we believe in the reality of the Holy Spirit as a living and present reality, energising our church life.

Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost are the signs from God that Christ is alive and at work as much today as ever. Three things need to be said about this...

1. In an age of social change, the Church too must adapt its practices to present its message in terms which ordinary folk will understand and accept. To a much greater extent than we might want to admit, these changes are happening in our programme of outreach; not just worship styles and new music (‘songs’ not hymns) but real dialogue with victims of ignorance and misunderstandings to get the true message over – and perhaps evidence of the practical social caring the church does, maybe too discreetly!
2. In a society that has defined ‘happiness’ in terms of wealth, leisure and self-gratification, it is possible to detect an undercurrent of disappointment: people are realising that having everything we want does not necessarily make us happy, and Man really does not live by bread alone after all. A survey in 2006 showed that 40% of the population were “not against” religious belief, and 30% agreed that the Church had had some influence on their thinking and values, even where they were not regular worshippers. The Church has the answer to the human hunger for spirituality. The gospel is about helping people to recognise that hunger and to find the fulfilment of it in communion with the God who created us to enjoy His companionship.
3. We need to compare the falling statistics of church attendance in the western world with what is happening globally. Many societies in the Middle East, Africa and the Far East have significant Christian communities, in some cases sizeable enough to be seen by other faith cultures as a threat, and so are subjected to persecution. In truth, God speaks many languages beside English, and the language of love is paramount in every place!

Peter’s message to his hearers in Jerusalem that day was that they should “change their ways” – challenging a traditional Judaism which had lost its way and its living spirituality under a dead weight of rules and regulations, and urging them to receive the “new wine”

that Jesus talked about: a fresh approach which allows God to re-create the life within each believer and makes possible those enterprises to which He calls us. It's not so much about bemoaning our many sins and shortcomings: that is PENITENCE, sometimes a painful necessity but not in itself helpful or constructive. This is about something different: REPENTANCE, which is 'opening up to God', allowing God's Spirit to change the way we think, and as a result change the way we behave. When we put our faith into the hands of God in this way, the promise is open to us as it was to those Jews long ago: "God will give you the power of his Spirit!"

Thanks be to God.

PRAYERS of intercession

Let us pray

Lord and Father God, who gave us life and awareness, who redeems us in Christ and shows us in him the way we should live, who lives in power and presence among us by your Spirit; help us as we pray to bring the mind of Christ into the human situations we encounter in our daily life.

Your Holy Spirit blesses us with the gifts of grace, and we pray that your gifts may work in us your people – your Church – to make a difference in the human family to which we belong.

The gift of the Spirit is love, joy and peace.

May your Church across the world speak the reconciling language of Jesus bringing peace and justice to all nations, and an end to war, slavery and exploitation of the poor.

The gift of the Spirit is patience, kindness and goodness.

In our community life, may the healing touch of Jesus continue to bless and prosper the work of those who relieve suffering of mind and body in hospitals and in the home. We keep in mind especially the needs of the people of India and Brazil in the present pandemic, and pray for human compassion and the will to support all who are caring for the needy.

The gift of the Spirit is faithfulness, humility and self-control.

We remember the many human contacts each of us will make in the course of our daily lives; in the home, in church, in the street, or at our place of work. May the graciousness of Christ enable us to love our neighbour, to welcome the stranger, to encourage the confused and the guilt-ridden, to comfort the sorrowing, and to be the ones who speak his name through how we behave towards those whom you have called us to love.

Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

HYMN: Spirit divine

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Spirit divine, attend our prayers,
And make this house your home;
Descend with all your gracious pow'r;
O come, great Spirit, come!

2 Come as the light; to us reveal
Our emptiness and woe,
And lead us in those paths of life
Where all the righteous go.

3 Come as the fire and cleanse our hearts
With purifying flame;
Let our whole life an off'ring be
To our Redeemer's name.

4 Come as the dove and spread your wings,
The wings of peace and love,
And let your Church on earth become
Blest as the Church above.

5 Come as the wind, with rushing sound
And Pentecostal grace,
That all of woman born may see
The glory of your face.

6 Spirit divine, attend our prayers,
Make this lost world your home;
Descend with all your gracious pow'r;
O come, great Spirit, come!

Andrew Reed

BLESSING

The Lord is near; do not be anxious, but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

Amen.