

Daily Inspiration for the week after Pentecost: 6 reflections from Acts 2:1-41

Monday after Pentecost (intro) – Acts 2:1-21 ‘Weak made strong’

Pentecost, the pouring out of the Spirit in a new and glorious way: on all people, for all time.

There’s so much we could say about this wonderful passage. How the manifest presence of God came to Jesus’ friends in wind and fire. How it ignited mission, and fulfilled what we looked at yesterday, as the gospel could now reach ‘to the ends of the earth’. How it came at just the right moment, when multitudes of nations were gathered and could take this good news back to their homes and neighbourhoods. How it was mistaken for drunken behaviour and ridiculed, as sadly it sometimes still is today. How it represented a ‘new law’ for God’s people, which is what Pentecost had traditionally celebrated. How it brought Joel’s famous prophecy (day 17) to life...

And we can celebrate all of those things. But as we spend this week in Acts ch2, celebrating this world-changing moment, let’s begin by looking at what it meant for the disciples, and how that might speak to us. I’ve been reminded recently of something profound written about St. Peter by the great Christian writer, G.K. Chesterton (and please forgive the non-inclusive language, Chesterton was of his time):

“When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward – in a word, a man. And upon this rock He has built His Church, and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible. For no chain is stronger than its weakest link.”

At the heart of our story today is Peter, who stands up before the crowds as a person transformed. Chesterton is right to note that Peter is essentially someone like us, and that this is why he proved such a great choice to lead in the upside-down kingdom of Jesus.

But this *Peter has a new power inside him*. He is no longer operating solely out of his human weakness, but in the power of Christ, which fills and equips Peter by His Spirit. Which means we can now look at Chesterton’s insight two ways: not just celebrating that God uses weak people (like us) to achieve His purposes. But also, since Christ indwells every Christian, then in fact every ‘weakest link’ is now *far stronger than we could ever dare to imagine*. Not our strength, but Jesus’.

Pentecost may have been a unique occasion, an unparalleled experience. But it speaks to a deeper truth for each of us: that the Spirit enables us to do things we could never have imagined possible. *The Spirit is still enabling us today*. What does – or might – that beautiful truth look like for you?

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Tuesday after Pentecost – Acts 2:1-13 ‘What does this mean?’

Many of you will be familiar with the scene at Pentecost. A group is gathered, praying, and suddenly the place is filled with wind and fire. On Pentecost Sunday we usually look at what it means for God’s Spirit to manifest as fire and wind – how we need the fire to ignite our passion for God and whatever God calls us to; how we need the wind to blow us to the places God wants to be and the people God wants us to love. And that is vital.

But let’s look today at the immediate aftermath. This dramatic experience was not for its own sake. It set about a chain of events. The outcome for the disciples is that many of them received the gift of new languages. The gift of tongues is usually understood now to relate primarily to a form of ‘heavenly language’, unintelligible to most people – and that is the most common form of the gift today. But here at the start these were *actual* languages. What the disciples spoke was understood by a large multi-lingual crowd who had gathered from across the known world to celebrate a big Jewish festival. No Google Translate in those days: God was equipping a group of largely ‘unschooled’ people (Acts 4:13) to do his work in a remarkable way.

The second link in the chain is perhaps not surprising: this large crowd was ‘utterly amazed’ (v7) to hear their own language being spoken. More than that, they were ‘perplexed’ (v12). It is almost inevitable that they ask the million-dollar question: ‘What does this *mean*?’

A lot is spoken – and mis-spoken – about spiritual gifts. Some make them a requirement of real faith, others a dangerous distraction. All I can say, from my own experience, is that such gifts are not faked, or forms of self-deception: they are absolutely real, and wonderful – but they also have a purpose. They are never given just to provide us with an ‘experience’. They are Jesus’ gifts – and as such, they are there to do Jesus’ work in the world. The exercise of such gifts in a Christlike way always prompts people to explore further: ‘What does this mean?’

Faith in Jesus is not just true, it’s *real*. And sometimes people need a divine prod to back up what we speak and how we live. Most of the most ‘noticeable’ gifts of the Spirit happen in the context of mission – in other words to demonstrate that Jesus is real, and exactly who he says he is.... just as we see here. This chain of events in today’s passage sets the scene for Peter’s great speech that comes next.

You may or may not have experienced this kind of thing. It doesn’t matter – there is no place either for pride or a false sense of inadequacy in the journey of faith. But perhaps we can all take a step today to pray for more of God, for openness to whatever gifts he may graciously want to give us – and for opportunities to meet those asking: ‘What does this mean?’ Our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

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Wednesday after Pentecost – Acts 2:14-21 ‘On all people’

We all love a bit of ‘secret knowledge’. Access to information that others don’t have. Recently I watched a documentary about the group of spies who created the deceptions that allowed the Allies to carry out the D-Day landings. It was absolutely fascinating to see how this group of five (codenamed Treasure, Tricycle, Garbo, Brutus and Bronx; great names!) played on a very human trait – our shared love of insider knowledge – to achieve something remarkable.

For most of us, it’s not that glamorous. A bit of gossip here, a tip about a sale item there. Early in 2020, as the pandemic took hold, we swapped endless stories of which shops had anti-bac or toilet rolls. And in the religious life most cultures have always been drawn to the idea of special people, or secret wisdom. Call them seers, shamans or senseis, it’s thought that certain people have privileged access to the spiritual realm.

At one level, we can recognise the value of this: humans have always needed leaders, in the spiritual life as much as in other spheres. But – humans being what they are – this brings with it the risk of unhealthy control, manipulation or downright deceit. God is the Lord of the whole earth, and every human being is made in God’s image, we carry the divine imprint. Is it right in the spiritual life to grant privileged access only to some?

At Pentecost, amazingly, the answer is ‘not any more’. The great gift of the pouring out of God’s Spirit is not just the new power it brings, or the energy for mission, or the birth of God’s great community (the Church) – it is the possibility of *direct access to the presence of God for all people*. ‘In the last days,’ Joel prophesies on God’s behalf, ‘I will pour out my spirit on all people.’ (v17) Young and old, women and men.

God’s Spirit has always been at work in the world – but until Pentecost, it tended to be for particular people at particular times. But from now on, *all of us* can encounter the presence of God, can have Jesus dwell in us by his Spirit, can know the joy and intimacy of a real and close relationship with the Almighty Lord of all creation. Or to use St. Paul’s words 25 years later: ‘By the Spirit we cry “Abba, Father”.’ By God’s grace and the gift of his Spirit, we can all become children of God.

So today, give thanks that this gift is for *you*. Not just for the great and the good, for the specially chosen and those privileged with ‘secret access.’ The secrets of the kingdom of heaven are laid open to all! Ask God to draw close to you again, to fill your heart and to grant you the joy of sharing in this remarkable gift with hundreds of millions of people across the world. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Thursday after Pentecost – Acts 2:22-28 ‘Death cannot keep its hold’

I spent time looking at my patio today. A strange thing to do, you might wonder. About 50 slabs of paving stone, grey and uniform. Pretty dull, I guess. But what I was really looking at were all the things pushing up between the cracks. Grasses, weeds, the occasional wild flower. Every few months we clear them – and they always just grow right back again.

For those of you who love order, it's a mess – perhaps a headache you're aware of in your own garden. But I like to look at it another way, and not just because I'm a lazy gardener. What I love about seeing all those plants pushing their way up and out into the fresh air is the sense of *irrepressible life*. However hard we try to destroy it, abundant life just keeps reappearing.

This has long been a passion of mine. Until we moved to MK, I'd lived virtually all of my life in urban areas, many of them on the rough and ready side. My world was concreted, bricked and paved. And yet, what was remarkable was *how often life would push out through the cracks* – up the side of a wall, through a crack in the pavement, peeping out through a fence. We usually dismiss them as weeds – but in the city, I used to call them beautiful. Signs of irrepressible life, no matter how hard we tried to stamp it out.

'This is the testimony: God has given us life, and this life is in his Son.' These words of St John remind us of a simple but profound truth. God is the author of life – and as people made in God's image, *we are made for life, too*. Where God is, there is life.

So when God comes to earth, how does this play out? At one point, not as we expect: the author of life dies. Wrongly charged, corruptly convicted – innocent and betrayed, alone on a cross. But this could never be the end of the story. How can you destroy irrepressible life? Or as St Peter says in today's reading: 'But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.' (v24)

The agony of death for Jesus was not so much the physical process of dying, but momentary separation from his Father. And yet it could only be temporary, because life cannot be held back forever. The resurrection reminds us that God has life within himself, and God's purpose, not just for Jesus but for all of us, is life. Death is not the final answer – the ultimate destiny of all those who choose to live their lives in God is *life*.

May our prayer today be David's cry of joy at the end of this passage: 'You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.' And, perhaps, take a look at the weeds on your patio or your path and give thanks for irrepressible life! It's what we were made for.

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Friday after Pentecost – Acts 2:29-36 ‘God had promised’

Promises, promises. It’s something we all find ourselves doing, but fulfilling them is not always straightforward. During the covid pandemic, so many promises have had to be postponed or cancelled, through things outside our control. Is it better not to promise at all?

Interestingly, God doesn’t have an issue with making promises or vows. Jesus’ teaching on not swearing oaths in the Sermon on the Mount is more to do with abusing language to manipulate people than the idea that we shouldn’t make firm commitments. Indeed, our integrity should be such that a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is enough for people to know that we will do what we said we will do.

And God makes promises to us, too. Indeed at the heart of what we call ‘faith’ is that sense of trust that God will do what he said he will do. That God does wonderfully forgives us, fully and freely; that God does send us the Holy Spirit – what Peter indeed calls in this passage ‘the promised Holy Spirit’; that God will take us to enjoy eternal, abundant life in heaven. *Faith rests on the promises of God.*

And God also promised many centuries ago that a new anointed rescuer would come, a king to sit on David’s throne. ‘God had promised’ this to David – and it is now remarkably and perfectly fulfilled in Jesus.

The result of these promises: ‘God has made this Jesus.... Lord and Messiah.’ (v36) Our great rescuer and now the One we can worship and follow.

When life is tough it’s easy to get weary of commitments and promises. But a deeper truth is at work: a certain foundation on which our lives can rest. God’s promises never fail. He has not forgotten you. He still loves you. He is still with you. And you are still with him. Take a few moments today to call to mind some of the great promises of God. And may that lift your heart and soul in praise.

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Saturday after Pentecost – Acts 2:37-41 ‘In the name of Jesus’

The Sunday after Pentecost (in the traditional church calendar) is Trinity Sunday, a day when we celebrate the fact that the God we love and worship is one being with three natures: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On this Sunday of the year we reflect on why this profound idea is such an amazing thing: it means we worship a *uniquely 3-dimensional God*, someone we can relate to in many deep ways - a magnificent monarch, a wise teacher and judge, an inspiring example, a comforting presence in our lives, a close friend. God is both up in heaven and in our hearts. If God had only one nature, think what we would lose!

Today though, we remind ourselves that there is a ‘way in’ to this extraordinary relationship. God is Christlike – and Jesus (the Son) is also the way to the Father and the Spirit. The Christian faith is ultimately a *Christ-centred* faith: we trust in, and follow, Jesus. And this idea runs throughout the last part of Peter’s sermon:

- We are forgiven in the name of Jesus (v38)
- We are baptised in the name of Jesus (v38)
- As a result, we receive the Holy Spirit (v38: noting it was Jesus who received the Spirit from the Father and pours it out on us – v33)
- Ultimately, we are called by God (v39) to believe in the promises fulfilled by Jesus.

It’s all in the name of Jesus. This is how we change our lives (the meaning of the word ‘repent’ – a word sadly obscured sometimes by too much religious baggage).

What always touches me when I read these amazing stories of the early church is how much Jesus is at the centre of everything – how much the apostles loved Jesus, and built everything they said and did around this love. Every time I read them, I think to myself: I want a bit of that! Maybe you do, too.

The good news is that this is not just a historical record. As Peter insists, this kind of life is available to everyone: us, our families, and even those who are far off. No-one is too young or too old, too good or too bad, too cynical or too gullible. *Jesus is for all of us.* And in his name we have forgiveness, a new life, and power by his Spirit to live that new life. May that new life be ours today, this week, and for eternity.