

“THEY WERE ALL TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE”

Acts 2

Well, we're all back together again – or as many of us as can make it and can fit in under the current guidelines. Apart from a couple of afternoon services back in the autumn of last year, this is the first time we've been able to meet in here since 15th March last year. It seems a long time ago and an awful lot has happened in this fourteen months. It's been a tough old time for many of us and we've had to put up with all kinds of things we never dreamed of. But we've also learned a great deal and we've discovered new things (mainly to do with technology, I would guess) and found new ways of doing things, some of which have been very helpful and some of which will soon be forgotten. And God has been at work in all kinds of ways, so we're told.

So it's appropriate that we meet here on Pentecost Sunday – a key moment in the life of the Christian Church; some would say the birth of the Church, the day it started to take shape. As that day dawned a couple of millennia ago, Luke tells us that the disciples of Jesus were “*all together in one place*”. And, as they met together, God came to move amongst his people. Something very special happened as they met there in Jerusalem while all around them people were celebrating the Jewish Feast of Pentecost.

Although Jesus had promised his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit – we read about that in the previous chapter, in vv4,5,8, and in his final conversation with them before his death in John's Gospel – he, rather frustratingly, hadn't given them any details. He hadn't told them **how** the Spirit would be bestowed on them, nor **when** exactly, nor **where** they would be – other than in Jerusalem – so they almost certainly weren't expecting what happened. It wasn't something that they – nor, indeed, anyone – had experienced before. And I guess we're not really expecting anything like that to happen here today. There's been no risk assessment, especially with tongues of fire potentially involved. We don't really have any policies to cover this kind of eventuality, so if the Holy Spirit does make some kind of spectacular entrance, we won't be able to work out who's liable for anything that happens. And as for safeguarding concerns – well, we're wide open to all kinds of problems.

But that's the point, isn't it? When God's people come together, we ought to be ready to expect the unexpected, ready to risk something out of the ordinary happening, ready to experience what William Cowper memorably called God's “*mysterious ways*”. Sadly, along with the rest of our culture, we have become so risk averse, so distrustful of anyone or anything else, so desperate to be able to control all that happens ourselves, that we leave God no room to work in our lives. God longs to move among us, I believe, and when he does, it changes things. He's not about consolidating the status quo, keeping stuff comfy for us, making sure everything just continues ticking along nicely. A bit of a shame really, because the unexpected unsettles me and, if God's involved too, well quite frankly, it scares the heck out of me. But

there is no doubt that he is the God of transformation and when he does move, stuff gets changed – and pretty fundamentally changed at that.

You see, we think of Pentecost in terms of God's appearing in flames of fire, bestowing the gift of tongues, and ushering in an era of spiritual gifts (although, it has to be said, God had been doing most of that in various ways for many centuries before this). And we see all that as aids to worship and ways of helping us do better what we're already doing. We didn't read the whole of chapter 2 of *Acts* this morning, but we hopped over to the end of the chapter and there it is obvious that these followers of Jesus had their lives changed dramatically. The activity of the Holy Spirit wasn't really seen in the things that went on in that room where they were together – it was seen in a totally new outlook on life, a transformed life that took seriously all that they had heard from Jesus. Shane Claiborne, an American activist who was the keynote speaker at the Baptist Assembly last weekend, is one of a group of people who call themselves "Red Letter Christians", after the custom some Bible publishers have of printing Jesus' words in red. And they describe themselves as people who live "*as if Jesus actually meant what he said*". "Surely not!" I hear you say, "Jesus spoke in metaphors and parables. We're not supposed to take any of it at face value." But these first followers of Jesus certainly went along with it.

The transformation was seen in a **new boldness**, as these people who not very long before had been huddling together "*for fear of the Jews*" suddenly started speaking out about their faith. In v4, Luke says that "***All of them*** were filled with the Holy Spirit and ***began to speak***" – and it wasn't just in the quiet anonymity of their meeting room, because we learn a couple of verses later that the crowd could all hear what they were saying. Suddenly these followers were sharing their faith with complete strangers and proclaiming their praise quite openly.

The transformation was seen in a **new passion for Jesus**, as they "*devoted themselves*" (v42) to teaching, fellowship, prayer and worship. They realised that what Jesus had called them to was a life lived for him, learning from his word, sharing their experiences, encouragements and emotions with each other, putting him at the centre not just of their worship but of their entire lives.

That's because this new passion drove a transformation which was seen in a **new lifestyle**. They lived a life of commonality, sharing not just their experiences and insights but also their property and their homes. They demonstrated hospitality and generosity on a scale that would scare most of us rigid, and would have some of us expostulating about the creeping evils of socialism. Their worship was transformed as they met together every day to express that in public ("*in the temple courts*").

This was an amazing transformation in the lives of these first followers, people who had come together, believing a promise that Jesus had given them and expecting something – although they knew not what – to happen among them. And what happened was attractive and drew others in. The fact that God had moved in their lives and they weren't trying to hide it, explain it away or downplay it, was a witness in itself. Peter stood up and preached – as, no doubt, did others when the opportunity arose – but most of them bore witness to the astonishing grace of God through the way they lived their lives. The church grew because of the integrity and holiness of these people's lives. When they were all together, God moved and it made a powerful difference in their situation and in the lives of many others. Is that why you are here today, why we are "*all together in one place*"? Because you want that to happen in some way here in Lichfield?

Some people hail this opportunity to get together after so long as **a return to normality**. It's great that we're able to get together and do many of the things that we used to do. We like the music and the company, the surroundings and the sermons. It's what we've done for years, maybe, and it's a sign that better days are just around the corner. Fair enough – it can be comforting, and bolster our hope and our faith, renew our desire to work and witness as a church here at the heart of this city. But the story of Pentecost would seem to suggest that this is actually about new beginnings, a new start, a move away from normality. We've had time to think, to reflect, to consider whether we'd just got a bit too comfortable in recent years, happy with the old routines and content to do what we'd always done. And we've learned a heck of a lot – about ourselves, about each other, about the society in which we live. That all needs to make a difference now and we must be open to what God might be wanting us to do as we move forward. That applies collectively as a congregation, but also personally as followers of Jesus. What has God been saying to you over the past few months? And, more to the point, what are you going to do about it?

Some people hail this opportunity to get together after so long as **an opportunity to share our worship again**. And it certainly is that. It's good to be here together, even if we can't sing as heartily as we'd like – but that's not too far off – and there isn't any coffee afterwards. But it's not just that. It's not just so that we can have a good old knees up in the guise of being pious. This is about drawing on God's resources so that we can go out after an hour or so together in here and live the other 167 hours of the week in a way that might mean we "*enjoy the favour of all the people*" and God might regularly add to our number those who are being saved. (Not that we really believe he would – I've even said "regularly" instead of "daily", just to be on the safe side.)

Some people hail this opportunity to get together after so long as **a victory for personal freedom**. That's been a bit of a watchword generally for many in our country – although not quite as much as in the United States. "Now I can do what I want again, and no-one's going to stop me, no-one has the right to challenge

me.” People shout for personal freedom so that they can follow their own agenda and stuff the rest of them. It’s the battle cry of the individualistic society that we have spoken about so often in recent months. The irony for us, as we reflect on this story – and, indeed, the message of the whole of the New Testament – is that this is quite the opposite. These first Christians were following Jesus’ command to take up their cross and follow him, to put to death those selfish desires and pre-Jesus ways as they submitted to God and allowed him to work in their lives. We’re here today – I hope – to express once again our worship of the God who has saved us and given us a hope and a future. But also to give him the opportunity to move in our lives and transform us – to give us renewed boldness, to reignite our passion for Christ, to lead us into new ways of living in community as his disciples in an ultimately hostile and self-serving world.

Yes, we are starting to get together again. It’s great and I do not want for one moment to downplay the sheer joy of that – as human beings we are created for community – but are we expecting God to work among us, within us? Are you expecting what we do here to contribute to the transformation of your life? Are you willing for the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh today? Because, if you’re not, then this is, frankly, just a bit of harmless entertainment. I pray that we might see amazing new things happening as we start again to meet and work together as followers of Jesus, as Christians who bear the name of the transforming, life-changing, world-moving, mind-blowing Son of God.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) What particular things have you learned as a result of the past fourteen months of pandemic? How has it changed you? Has God spoken to you in any way?
- 2) What kinds of thing can quench our passion for Jesus? What can we do about it?
- 3) The first Christians adopted a very radical lifestyle. Should we? Why/why not? What might it look like in practice today?
- 4) Is personal freedom something we should be pursuing as followers of Jesus? Why/why not?
- 5) What is the main point of this story for you? What are you going to do about it?