

# The Power of the Spirit

Preached on Whitsunday  
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ  
May 23, 2021  
Text: Acts 2: 1-11

Today is the Feast of Pentecost, traditionally known as Whitsunday or Whitsun in Anglican circles, especially among folks who—like us—use one of the older forms of the Book of Common Prayer. This traditional name is a contraction of “White Sunday,” which is usually thought to be due to the traditional white garment worn by those who would be baptized at Pentecost. According to Prayer Book tradition, Pentecost is one of the ideal days to baptize new converts.

The Feast of Pentecost celebrates the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the Apostles, as we read in our Epistle a few minutes ago. You may have noticed in the passage that the setting is a celebration of the Day of Pentecost, even before the Holy Spirit had come upon them. This is because Pentecost is an Old Testament feast commanded by God in his Law for the Israelites.

In most English translations, Pentecost is called the Feast of Weeks in the Old Testament, which is a literal translation of the Hebrew name, *Shavuot*. According to Leviticus 23 and other passages in the Law, the Feast of Weeks was to be celebrated seven weeks and a day after the Passover. This period of 50 days gives us the name Pentecost, based on the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was in wide use during the First Century. Pentecost in the Old Testament was a harvest feast, celebrating the first fruits of the wheat harvest. It was one of the three Pilgrim Feasts of the Torah, when all Israelite men were to come to Jerusalem to worship and bring an offering. This is why Jerusalem was full of pilgrims when the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2. Pilgrims from all over the world were in Jerusalem in obedience to God’s Law.

By the First Century, Pentecost was also when the Jewish people celebrated the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. Working out the math in the Old Testament, they had come to estimate that it was 50 days after the Exodus when the Israelites had come to the Holy Mountain, and Moses brought them the 10 Commandments from God himself. Today, Judaism’s primary focus for the Feast of Weeks is the celebration of the giving of the Law. After all, as David tells us in Psalm 119, and St. Paul confirms in Romans 7, the Law of God is a good thing. It tells us what God expects from his people. It shows us his righteousness, justice, and goodness. It restrains evil deeds by giving us rules for living in community. Most of all, it shows us the perfection of God’s standards, which drives us to seek the Lord’s mercy. That is, the goodness of God’s Law shows us our wickedness, just as the perfect whiteness of a fresh layer of snow reveals how dirty even the cleanest sheep really is. And this spiritual reality check is what drives us to Christ. St. Paul tells us in Galatians 3 that the Law is a schoolmaster or guardian that reveals to us our need for Christ’s redemption.

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost, he confirmed and fulfilled the Old Testament pattern for the Feast. Just as the Feast of Weeks was the time when the Pilgrims would bring the first fruits of their wheat harvest to the Lord as an offering, so too did the work of the Spirit result in a first fruits of souls. We read that the Pilgrims had all heard the goodness of God in their own mother tongues. Immediately after our reading in Acts 2, St. Peter tells the pilgrims the good news of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus for the sake of us sinners, and 3,000 men were converted and baptized. Just as the first fruits is a taste of what is to come in the harvest, so too were these 3,000 Jewish converts from throughout the world a mere hint of what God would do when the Gospel was proclaimed to Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. We are worshiping the God of Israel and his Son our Lord Jesus Christ as part of that ultimate harvest.

Also, just as the Feast of Weeks celebrates the giving of God's Law on Mt. Sinai, so does Pentecost celebrate the giving of God's Spirit in Jerusalem. The Law was, and is, God's holy word. St. John tells us in Chapter 1 of his account of the Gospel that our Lord Jesus is the Word made Flesh who dwelt among us. The Gospel is the good news of the Word made Flesh. But if you recall our Gospel passages from the last few Sundays, even the Apostles didn't understand Jesus or his teachings at the time he gave them. But in our Gospel passage today, Jesus said: "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." So God's word in both Law and Gospel is illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and quickened within us so that we might be born again. The Holy Spirit is active in our new birth, even as he was active in our Lord's incarnation and birth. As we confess in the Creed, as St. Luke tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel account, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary. You and I are spiritually conceived by the Holy Ghost of our Mother the Church. This is signified in our baptism, just as those 3,000 converts on Pentecost were all baptized by St. Peter and the Apostles.

In John 3 our Lord told Nicodemus that we must be born again of water and Spirit. When we have that new birth, when we are regenerate, the Holy Spirit dwells within us. St. Paul tells us that our lives will show evidence of whether God's Spirit does indeed dwell in us and is leading us, or if we are following our fallen, unregenerate flesh. Galatians 5, beginning at verse 19, says:

*Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*

Pentecost is a good time to inspect the fruit of our lives. The thing about fruit is that it is the natural outcome of a healthy tree. And the kind of fruit produced is based on the kind of tree. Apple trees bear apples, not oranges. If God's Spirit dwells in you, your life should be marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness, and self-control to one extent or another. But if your life is characterized by the “works of the flesh,” you should be concerned. If you’re a baptized Christian who is walking in the works of the flesh, Pentecost is a call to repent. It’s a call to turn back to God and let the Divine Gardener bring health to the fruit tree of your soul. And if you’ve never turned to God by faith in repentance and baptism, Pentecost is a call to be born again of Water and Spirit, just like those Pilgrims to whom St. Peter and the Apostles preached.

Finally, at that special Pentecost in Acts 2, we read “And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” At the end of our passage, the Pilgrims are astonished and said “Are not all these who are speaking Galilean? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?” A major theme of the Pentecost story is the theme of tongues.

As we read, the Holy Spirit fell on the Disciples as cloven tongues of fire. From the pillar of fire and cloud at the Exodus, to the fiery mountain when Moses was on Sinai, to the showdown between the Prophet Elijah and the false prophets of Baal, and many, many other times, the Lord shows his power and presence by the descent of fire. Pentecost was no different. The fiery tongues that came upon the Apostles showed them that Jesus’s promise had been fulfilled, and God the Holy Ghost had come to be with them forever.

The tongues of fire that fell upon them also preceded the Holy Spirit loosening the tongues of the Apostles so that they would preach the Gospel. And when this was manifested, it happened in other languages, perceived by the Pilgrims as their own mother tongues. As international travelers worshiping at the Jewish Temple, the Pilgrims would have almost certainly been functional in both Greek and Hebrew. But God revealed the Gospel to them, via the inspired preaching of the Apostles, in the languages that each pilgrim knew most intimately. He spoke to them in the language that they learned before they knew about learning, in the language that formed a core part of who each of them was.

There are reports of this kind of thing happening from time-to-time in missionary situations even today. But more importantly than that, this is an illustration of how the Holy Spirit loosens our tongues to speak the Gospel in each of our own contexts. You never have to be afraid of speaking the Gospel to your neighbor because the Spirit will be with you and will be speaking to your neighbor as he wills. The Spirit does the work in conversion; it’s not on your shoulders. You just need to speak of what you know: those truths summarized in our Creeds about who Jesus is and what he has done for you and for me. As St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received; that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”

The Holy Spirit always points us back to Jesus. The Holy Spirit works to bring sinners to Christ, to sanctify Christians, and to lead us all deeper into the heart of the Father. As our Gospel said and as we will pray during our Preface for today, the Holy

Spirit came to lead us into all truth, the truth that is found in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. It is by his blood that the Holy Spirit brings us “out of darkness and error into the clear light and true knowledge” of the Father.

*In the Name...*