Fire

Do you remember the song 'Pass it on'? Sung in Sunday Schools, and around campfires at youth camps, and sometimes in church…

It only takes a spark to get a fire going, then soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.

The image of fire has always been a powerful one. Fire is foundational to human civilisation – it scares away wild animals, it lights our spaces, it keeps us warm, it cooks our food, it hardens our bricks, it refines our metals, and on and on. Beyond the practical benefits, there is something about fire that is attractive to us… people love to sit and watch the flickering flames of a campfire or a fireplace.

But even as we are entranced by the flames, we know that fire can be dangerous and destructive. We are conscious of its power.

For the ancient people of God, fire was a reminder of the presence and power of God. God spoke to Moses through the burning bush (Exodus 3), Mt. Sinai is covered with holy fire (Exodus 19) , the Prophet Elijah called fire down from heaven (1 Kings 18/2 Kings 1), the live coal that was touched to Isaiah's lips (Isaiah 6:6-7) , the prophet Malachi told of God's refining fire (Malachi 3:2).

We remember too, that John the Baptist prophesied that Jesus would baptise "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." (Matthew 3:11)

And as we've heard in our reading from Acts today, on that first Pentecost, the disciples saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. (2:3)

Pentecost began as the Jewish festival of Shavu'ot, which is an annual Jewish feast that takes place some fifty days after Passover - at the beginning of the wheat harvest. Shavu'ot is a time when the people present the first fruits of their harvest to God in thanksgiving and praise. Shavu'ot is also a time when Jewish people particularly remember God giving Moses the Law on Mount Sinai – fifty days after the Exodus from Egypt.

Before his ascension, Jesus has instructed his followers to wait, and even as Jerusalem was busy with visitors for the festival of Shavu'ot, that's what they were doing: (Acts 1:14) Waiting and praying.

It was "when the Day of Pentecost had fully come" (Acts 2:1) that the Holy Spirit was poured out on those waiting disciples – and we remember the noise like the rushing of the wind, the tongues of fire resting on them, and the disciples speaking in other languages

Those three phenomena of fire, rushing wind and words were also present at the giving of the law in Mount Sinai (Hebrews 12:18-19). While the wind and the fire were miraculous, Luke focuses his account on the disciples speaking in other languages.

The “other tongues” of Acts 2:4 have been long been recognised as a reversal of the curse of Babel: Just as God came down upon Babel to confound the language of people (Genesis 11:6-9), so he came at Pentecost with a universal message which could be understood by people from all over the world (Or at least the Roman world at the time).

Those who spoke were all Galileans (Acts 2:7). They were looked down upon as common country folk, and their accent would always identify them as such. Yet these common folk were coherently and, indeed, eloquently sharing the word of God in languages which they had never learned, but which their hearers could clearly understand. This gave rise to the question, “What can this possibly mean?” (Acts 2:12).

Not everyone was impressed, though. Some sought to mock the disciples. “They’ve had too much wine” they said(Acts 2:13) But they weren’t drunk – in fact, far from drunken ramblings, those men were empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the gospel, the good news, in a clear way to everyone who was there. They weren’t drunk. After all, as Peter pointed out, it was only nine in the morning (Acts 2:15).

Peter's sermon showed, that what was happening in Jerusalem on this day was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel 2. This was the age of the Holy Spirit, the age of the church, when young and old, near and far, servants and free were enabled to speak forth the words of God, and when all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

It only takes a spark to set a fire going.

Pentecost is often called ‘the birthday of the church’, and it was the day the promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled, giving the believers power and boldness, and beginning the church that we know today. Before the day of Pentecost, the disciples weren’t sure of how they would ever be able carry out the mission that Jesus had given to them, but after Pentecost, they were powerful witnesses, equipped to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

That is something we need to remember, the gift of the Holy Spirit is not just for our benefit, to help us as individual believers, but the Spirit is given to us for the benefit of others. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the church, not just to make it the church, but so it can be the church in the world.

We shouldn’t regard Pentecost as simply an historical event. Yes, each year, we remember the anniversary of that first Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles like the rush of a violent wind, with tongues as of fire dancing on their heads and people from all nations heard the apostles speaking in their own language, and more than 3,000 responding by being baptized.

Yes, we do remember that today, but we need to remember that that was just the beginning… it only takes a spark, to set a fire going. And on that day, the spark came, and the fire was going.

We might wonder where that fire is today? Are we missing it? We don’t see flames dancing on our heads, and not many of us can speak more than one language. So where

is the excitement of that first Pentecost? Do we see or feel or experience the Holy Spirit in our lives and our church today?

This might surprise you, but when Peter preached that first Pentecost sermon, he didn't speak English (not even the English of the King James Version)! And yet, we've heard it today. In our own language - just as people gathered today in churches around the world have heard it in their own languages – from Afrikaans to Zuñi (a native American language).

It might seem mundane rather than miraculous, but the work of bible translation is the work of the Holy Spirit within – and through – faithful people in all sorts of places across the world.

It only takes a spark to set a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.

Martin Luther wrote 'The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.'

We might not be conscious of it, but the Holy Spirit has called and gathered us here and has given us a variety of gifts, all for the common good. Paul tells his readers in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:4) "there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them". The Spirit has been poured out upon all people, as Peter tells us in his Pentecost sermon: young and old, men and women. All empowered by the Holy Spirit to work together as the church – as the body of Christ.

Hopefully, we recognise those gifts in each other – and also in ourselves.

When Peter finished his sermon on that first Pentecost, those who heard it asked him, "what should we do?" And Peter responded, "Repent, and be baptised … and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38). Rather than through the wind and fire by which the disciples received the Holy Spirit, those that come after will receive the Spirit through repentance and baptism.

And, having heard and repented and been baptised, those new Christians, those new recipients of the Holy Spirit devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42). They became part of the community – the gathered community of Christ – they became part of the church.

That change is as much a miracle as the rushing wind, the tongues of fire and the speaking in other languages – Luke tells us that about three thousand came to faith on that day.

Of course, that three thousand is a tiny amount compared to those that would follow – through the accounts in the book of Acts, through history, and right up to the present day. We, as the church, continue the traditions of devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching, to the breaking of bread, and praying for ourselves, each other and the whole world.

On the face of it, it might not be as exciting today as it was on that first Pentecost – we don't have tongues of fire and the rushing wind, but we are here, two thousand odd years later, as the church. Doing those very things that the church has been doing since that first Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is present among us, and within us now, just as the Spirit was then.

I think we often find ourselves wanting more. More excitement, more passion, more emotion, more people. More wind and fire! We might look at other congregations and denominations and be jealous that they seem to have those things – but the point of Pentecost is not the wind and the fire. The point of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit. All those other things can be good, but they are not the most important things.

If the point of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit, then the result of Pentecost is sharing the good news of the gospel with all nations. Do you remember what Jesus said right before the Pentecost miracle? He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

It was only through the power of the Holy Spirit that they were able to carry out that commission.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on the church on that first Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit dwells among us and within us today. We have everything we need to be the church – to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth – or even to the end of the street.

It only takes a spark to set a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing. That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it, you spread his love to everyone, you want to pass it on.

We're not here for the wind and the fire. We are here to worship the God who poured out that wind and fire, to give thanks for the gift of God's only son, who died to save us and forgive us, and we are here to receive again the promised Holy Spirit into our hearts and our lives.

We might want the tongues of fire resting on our heads, but what we have is the spark of the Spirit in our hearts, let's nurture that spark to a fire that will burn with passion.

While the world has changed in the intervening two thousand years, the essence of Pentecost hasn't changed. We are gathered here for the same reason the church has always gathered together. Let's all know the fire of the Holy Spirit within us, and let us share that fire with the world.

It only takes a spark.

Amen