

## SERMON: 4 June 2017 - Rev Dr Brenda Robson

### “Pentecost”

#### Acts 2:1-21

Most people, Christian and non-Christian, know about Christmas and Easter, fewer people, even Christians, could tell you that today is Pentecost. And yet Pentecost is arguably the most important day in the year. This is the day that the spirit came, the day that Jesus promised, the birthday of the church. Without Pentecost and the Holy Spirit the church would not exist.

The Jews celebrated Pentecost before it became a Christian celebration. They called it the Feast of Weeks commemorating the giving of the laws to Moses at Mount Sinai fifty days after the exodus from Egypt.

They also referred to it as the Day of the First Fruits. They traditionally read the book of Ruth which links with the grain harvest, the picture of Ruth gleaning left over grain in the field belonging to Boaz.

Jewish tradition has it that David was born and died at Pentecost and in Peter's first sermon told in Acts he links the life, death and ascension of Jesus to King David's death and burial and the hope of eternal life.

On that first Christian Pentecost, the disciples were gathered together in the upper room, most likely the same upper room where Jesus had shared the last supper with them. What a holy house that was! Jesus broke bread a few hours before his death and said “This is my body which is broken for you” and he took the cup of wine and said “This is my blood shed for you” and so he established our communion with him. And into that same room the Holy Spirit came in power.

The disciples were gathered together, waiting for something to happen, they did not know exactly what. They still did not get it. They had spent three years with Jesus. They had seen miracles and healings, seen Jesus walking on water and calming the sea, raising the dead and turning water into wine, feeding 5,000 people with a small basket of food. They had seen him crucified and they had seen him risen from the dead. They had then spent 40 more days with him and seen him ascend to heaven. But they still did not grasp the whole picture.

A few days before, Jesus had told them that he would ascend to his Father and they were to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. But they asked him “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). They still thought it was about them, it was about their earthly kingdom, Jesus was going to drive out the Romans and release Israel from foreign occupation and restore their land to them.

Jesus did not promise them that he would do this – instead he said that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit and they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1 : 8).

Jesus had a vast plan, beyond their imaginations. His plan was for then and for all time. His plan was for them and for all peoples.

After the Spirit came, Peter was able to say in his first sermon, “**Everyone who calls**

**on the name of the Lord will be saved”** (Acts 2:21). Everyone. Perhaps he was beginning to see the wider picture. And yet the early church would continue to drift towards Jewish tradition, for example suggesting that circumcision was still desirable. Peter would continue to avoid foods forbidden by his Jewish tradition and God had to speak to him in a dream and tell him that no food was forbidden and so no person would be forbidden from entering Christ’s church and Christ’s kingdom.

God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to individuals and all were filled with the spirit. The Holy Spirit guides, comforts, rebukes, directs, instructs. But the spirit comes not only to make us better people, it comes to enable us to become servants of Jesus and do the work that Jesus calls us to do. Paul said to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:7) – **“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”**

People often say to me, my faith is a private thing, it is not something to be talked about or shared, it is to be kept to myself. And yet that attitude is completely contrary to what Jesus and the Holy Spirit command and expect and require of us. The spirit within us is for the common good, for the benefit of all, for the purpose of making Christ known to a broken and fallen world.

Hear these verses from 1 Corinthians 12 : 4–11 in The Message –

**God’s various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: everyone gets on with it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful :**

<b>Wise counsel</b>	<b>Clear Understanding</b>
<b>Simple trust</b>	<b>Healing the sick</b>
<b>Miraculous acts</b>	<b>Proclamation</b>
<b>Distinguishing between spirits</b>	<b>Tongues</b>
<b>Interpretation of tongues</b>	

**All these gifts have a common origin but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who get what and when.**

So the gifts of the Spirit are in part to help us to live Christian lives as individuals but more importantly to help us live servant lives for the benefit of others around us, for the benefit of the church, for the benefit of all peoples to the ends of the earth.

If we exercise the gifts of the Spirit wisely then we will see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Paul wrote to the Galatians (5:22) that if they live by the Spirit then the fruit of the Spirit will be **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”**

We often think of these things as personal characteristics and traits, things that make us nicer people, aspects of our personalities that benefit us and give us greater contentment and peace and self-acceptance.

But these fruits also benefits the common good, benefits those around us, our

families and friends and neighbours, benefits the stranger we might meet or the work colleague or those we socialise with.

If we have love for others, then that obviously has a positive impact on others around us.

If we carry joy, we radiate joy, joy is infectious. You know what it is like when someone gets a fit of the giggles and everyone around starts to laugh too! Laughter is infectious and joy is infectious at a deeper level. If people carry joy with them then others will want to know where that joy comes from and want some of that joy. A lack of joy turns people off. Think of Rev I M Jolly! Rikki Fulton was actually a member of New Kilpatrick Church in Bearsden in Glasgow and he said he had a great Minister, one who made people smile occasionally and was uplifting. But he was appalled with the contrast presented by Late Call. For younger people who do not know what that is, there was a God slot at the end of evening viewing at about 11 pm before the National Anthem and the television going off until next day! A Minister sat and gave a short reflection, usually dressed in sombre black and not the epitome of joy.

In actual fact it is hard for us today to imagine a time when the Christian message would be broadcast to the nation every day. There was also a time when the proceedings of the General Assembly were broadcast at considerable length every evening rather than little snippets which nowadays focus mainly on the controversial and sensational.

Joy is infectious. Not superficial joy but the deep joy that comes from knowing Jesus.

Peace is a fruit of the Spirit. We are called to be peacemakers, the voice of calm and reason in the midst of chaos and confusion. And of course we carry the peace of Christ which he gives to us, not as the world gives.

Our patience benefits others. Impatience with others undermines them, causes stress, fails to bring out the best in others.

Our goodness is a witness to the love of God, if we seek to do what is right and good then we cannot be accused of hypocrisy.

Our faithfulness, gentleness and self control all contribute to the common good.

Imagine having a boss who is full of love and joy, always patient and self controlled, spreading kindness and goodness, bringing peace to the workplace. I hope if you are a boss or even part of a team or workforce, then you are that spirit filled person! You can see how the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit have such an impact on how we live our lives, how others see us, what kind of witness we are to the love of God and the example of Jesus Christ.

What was the impact of the coming of the Holy Spirit on those gathered and waiting? They immediately began to speak, not to say "How amazing am I, see what a spiritual person I have become" but rather to "declare the wonders of God."

And **Peter stood up with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd.** In the Message it reads that he **spoke out with bold urgency.** Peter who had been

afraid and tongue tied, Peter who had denied Christ three times, Peter who had run away from the courtyard when the cock crowed, Peter who had been living behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. Peter raised his voice and addressed the crowd. And he never stopped standing and speaking, even when he was abused and persecuted and imprisoned and eventually crucified. All made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And Peter in his first sermon spoke of God through his Spirit working in the supernatural – through dreams and signs and wonders and prophesy. The sermon was exciting and attractive and it convicted people. 3,000 people gave their lives to Christ that day. They were mainly Jews gathered from many countries in Jerusalem for the feast. I can imagine them going home to their families and spreading the good news and ensuring that their whole families were baptised in the name of Jesus. If every one of them brought ten more to Christ then there would soon be 30,000 and so the church grew. It says that “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2 : 47).

Today we need to recapture this excitement, we need to refresh our relationship with the Holy Spirit, we need to be open to the supernatural working of God in our lives and in our church.

So often we fret, we are anxious about the future, we talk endlessly to each other when we should be speaking to God in prayer. The General Assembly actually got off to a very good start on the first day.

The report of the Council of Assembly looks at the strategic plans for the church in the widest sense and its first deliverance or instruction was **“Issue a call to the Church of Scotland to pray that God will do a fresh work amongst us as God’s people and instruct Presbyteries and Kirk Session to consider how best to respond to this call”**

Instruct the church to pray. At one level it is somewhat bizarre that the General Assembly would have to instruct the church to pray! Perhaps that shows how desperate things are if the church now needs to get down on its knees to pray! This is an unusual call indeed from the General Assembly.

There was much discussion during the week about the problem of surplus and underused buildings. Even 121 George Street (or actually 117 to 121) is being scrutinised to decide if it is still fit for purpose as is the Assembly building itself, a building unused on 47 weeks of the year.

There are around 220 vacant Churches with about 10 new Ministers about to graduate. Only 25% of Ministers are under the age of 50 and a huge number will retire in the next ten years.

It is a good idea to pray to God. But let us pray with excitement and anticipation about the fresh work that God will do and indeed is doing. The Church needs to radically change and change it must. There is even discussion about people other than ordained Ministers being able to officiate at Communion. And that is because some Churches rarely have Communion together because there are no Ministers

locally.

God is at work amongst his people and he will do a new thing.

God is at work here in Kirknewton and East Calder. The closing date for applications for our Minister's post was Thursday and I do not know what the response has been, if any. But I do know that this matter is not in our hands. God will call or not call as he sees fit, in his time. We are not appointing a store manager or head teacher or chief executive officer, we are seeking the one that God will call to lead this flock in this community.

And so we need to pray to discern the heart and mind of God in this matter. We need to pray to be able to discern the call experienced by an applicant to this place. Speaking to God is more important than speaking to each other. Seeking God's heart is more important than edicts and procedures and parish profiles.

When a Church not far from here was vacant a number of years ago, a Minister in the north of Scotland applied and explained that he wanted to do a post-graduate degree in the United States and this Church local to here was well-placed near the airport to let him easily fly back and forwards to the States. Needless to say he was not appointed.

On this Pentecost Sunday let us take on board the call of the General Assembly to pray to God that he will do a new thing here in this parish and in the wider church.

Let us seek a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit in our lives, let us ask the Holy Spirit to fall afresh on each one of us, to mould us and to fill us.

Amen