

## Pentecost, 4 June 2017

### Acts 2:1-21

#### PRAY

There was once an abbot who became the new leader of an old and established abbey. He joined the brothers for the first Holy Communion service and was surprised as they began the service by going out to find a cat. Having found a cat, they solemnly locked it in the cupboard and then began the service. At the end of the service the cat was released and ran undisturbed away into the gardens of the abbey.

The new abbot thought for a while before calling the brothers together. The abbot said to the brothers “I am so happy to be serving you and the Lord here in this abbey. But there is something I do not understand. Why is it that when we begin a Holy Communion service, you go and find a cat and lock it in the cupboard?” The brothers looked amazed. They had all been there a long time and had got so used to this part of the ritual that they could not remember it being done any other way nor the reason for doing it. Indeed, it was so ingrained in the abbey’s life

that they had assumed it was done throughout the Christian world!

“We will consider this Father,” the brothers agreed and left him.

As they considered the question of the cat in the cupboard the brother, whose job it was to find the cat, felt threatened. What if the abbot was to change this practice, what would become of him if his job was taken away?

The brother who liked to release the cat felt sad, what if there was no cat to stroke and pet and receive affection from – who would love this man as the cat had?

One of the brothers felt excited – he was allergic to cats and the practice had always left him red eyed after Holy Communion services. He had never felt able to say anything of his discomfort, but this might be a good change!

But in all this mixture of fear, sadness, threat and hope no one actually knew why there had to be a cat locked in the

cupboard in the first place. Until a bookish young abbot with a penchant for local history came running to the abbot with an old journal left behind by a former abbot from many, many years before. The young man read the entry to the new abbot who smiled. Together the two went to all the brothers and read the entry to the gathered members of the abbey. It read “Today was the last straw. As we set up the communion table that blasted cat knocked all the wine and bread on to the floor again. From now on I will ensure that the cat is locked in the cupboard for our communion services.”

In the years since that first blasted cat being locked out of harm’s way, a tradition had grown up that none had questioned and now there was fear around change. But a new leader brought fresh eyes and the time for finding poor local cats and locking them up before worship came to an end. The brother who loved the cats could still go and pet them in the village. The brother with the allergies felt happier and able to serve afresh, and the brother who loved the job of finding and catching the cats left the abbey to work in a local cats home. And the work of abbey went on.

Newness brings change. Pentecost was a festival in the Jewish calendar. That is why Jerusalem was so full of people, Jewish people from all over the known world. It marked the day that Moses went up to receive the law 50 days after he took over leadership of the people and led them out of Egypt. It was also the festival of the first fruits – similar to harvest festival. The difference is that Pentecost was thanks for the beginning of the harvest, and sign of promise of more to come.

So, in this context of new leadership, the remembrance of God giving the law which was a new way for the people of God to live in post-slavery freedom, and the first fruits of a great harvest we have a moment of massive and traumatic change for the disciples and the crowd.

4 verses are dedicated to the coming of the Spirit on the disciples. They heard a noise like a hurricane. They saw fiery tongues appear to land on all of their heads, and they began to speak all at once in other languages through a supernatural ability.

But then the next 17 verses of our reading are concerned with the crowd. Because once the Holy Spirit has come on the disciples they cannot remain locked up any longer.

They are filled with courage and generosity that sees them suddenly in a public place addressing a huge international crowd. And what is the subject of the Peter's address? (As quoting) Jesus of Nazareth! The one you saw do works of healing and wonder. The one handed over to political powers, and the one you saw nailed to a cross. That Jesus is risen and now has gone to be at the right hand of God the Father praying for us. Because Jesus has ascended we now have this gift of the Holy Spirit poured out not on the in-crowd, the religious and the respectable but on all who call on the name of the Lord, that is Jesus.

Now, the Spirit of God the very spirit that raised Christ from the dead is available to live in all who ask. And this is what a life filled with the spirit will look like. It will look like drunk people. It will look like crazy courage and vast compelling bounteousness with the gifts that God gives. It will look like risk and it will look like mission – reaching out to the whole world with the news that Jesus alone saves. What is it to be saved? It is to know that we are

drowning. That those debts, that addiction, that grief and anxiety, that selfishness and unforgiven stuff is pushing us below the waves. It is to realise the need for rescue, to call for it and to receive the lifeline when it is thrown. It is to give up struggling on our own and to allow the love of God to pull us in like a life ring around us, firmly but gently hauling us to safety.

Today in a city filled with fear and uncertainty, we need to pause to acknowledge our need for rescue. And I want to assure you that God is ready to answer your cry of help.

That is what Peter, newly filled with the Holy Spirit went out to preach that morning. And the manner was so shocking that the people thought he and the others were drunk.

So NT Wright asks this question:

*Part of the challenge of this passage is the question: have our churches today got enough energy, enough spirit-driven new life, to make onlookers pass any comment at all? Has anything happened which might make people think we were drunk? If not, is it because the spirit is simply at work in other ways, or*

*because we have so successfully quenched the spirit that there is actually nothing happening at all?*

Dear friends, something is happening at St Michael's. Something very exciting and very new. Something that is causing the neighbours to talk.

I have now been here for 3 months. I am still new enough to recognise cats locked in cupboards but I am also seeing patterns and movements of God here. So, let me tell you what has been happening in the last few months:

We have been out of the building for worship and witness on no less than 4 occasions. We have run a full midweek discipleship course all the way through and are now half way through the second one, we have seen our numbers modestly grow in our 10am service, we have seen new people take on new roles in PCC and in safeguarding.

Every Friday at 6.30am I have been out prayer walking the parish and only once have I been alone. We have heard from Home for Good, we have been represented in a meeting with our MP regarding Wandsworth Welcomes Refugees, and I have been sought out by our local councillor to ask if we can help with a fostering appeal. On top of that we have just hosted 5 days of prayer here in

our church which saw new people come in from the neighbourhood, children pray and join in with us, their local church, at least 4 churches join together to unite in prayer. We joined in a move of God and it was good. And this afternoon we launch our first café style 4pm service. An informal time of worship teaching and prayer for those who do other things on Sundays mornings or who do not feel wholly fed in the traditional liturgical form of the morning service that many of us enjoy.

What else has happened? Well, we are under threat at the Day Centre. The old management has gone and the only way that we can save the current work will be to partner with a wonderful group based in Putney who have the experience of running a church based ministry for the elderly similar to ours but much more up to date. Pray for us, as tomorrow we will meet to think through all the implications of this.

However, I am convinced that St Michael's has a particular call to Jesus-shaped care for the elderly. In our society older people are at the very edge. Voiceless and powerless and I think that our heritage in this work is to be not just protected but grown and reinvigorated by

prayer and a move of the Spirit. It might look different from the past, but St Michael's care for the elderly is, I feel, a key part of our future.

And the music. Pawel will be leaving us in August. Another new chapter begins as he goes on to train and develop further and to bring music to many around the world as his career continues to flourish. We will give him a proper send-off but of course he even today I want to offer our love and thanks for the years of service here.

But every time something changes there is opportunity and of course fear of change. I used to think that I liked change until someone pointed out to me that no one likes change, people only like the change they like!

So here is a new change coming. Next term I will need to look for a choir master or mistress who will be able to grow the choir, to work with me to ensure that the worship of the church is more inclusive and more welcoming. Someone who has a passion and the right gifts to work with children and those who may be keen but as yet untrained. The worship services are my job to lead and I will be leading them. I promised to maintain the

traditional shape and I will do that, but there are some cats in the cupboard and I will be letting them out as the weeks go on.

You see part of the Pentecost story was Peter. Peter, like Moses before him and me today realised by the work of the spirit that we are responsible. Moses for the new Israel, Peter for the crowd and me for this parish. I promised before God and you when I was licenced here that I would proclaim the gospel afresh in every generation of my life. All clergy and readers make that promise. I promised to love and to shepherd you under Christ, and I realise that sometimes love means letting you go. If you cannot live with the direction of travel at St Michael's – that is one of Spirit filled prayer for the community, outreach to the vulnerable and hurting, engagement with power and listening to God and others to form our mission action plan then there are other churches for you.

I am unable to lead without the Holy Spirit and daily I pray for the spirit's filling. But I am leading this church and I am aware of the fear and the difficulty that brings to some of you, especially as, for good reasons, the last few years

have had rather less engaged leadership. It is unsettling. But Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. We are all disturbed when Aslan is on the move.

Let me finish by returning to the day Pentecost and the idea of the spirit like a rushing wind. Winds are studied and charted by meteorologists but they are also loved by sailors who are not looking in books or on screens but who are in the wind being powered by it, at times battered by it, feeling out of control or completely on top of it by turn. The wind is never tamed by the sailor, but sailors can be trained to work with the wind.

We will likewise never tame the Spirit of God. The Spirit will bring the havoc of healing, the trauma of transformation, the scandal of salvation and the preposterousness of prayer. The spirit will be constant in change and ever loving in the process. The spirit will fling open the doors of our heart and building to sadness, loss, joy, hope and unique moments of God encounter.

The fruit of the spirit will be seen in our forgiveness when we capsize in the wind because we have misjudged

ourselves or the Spirit's next move. The fruit will be seen in our getting up and going on. In our saying sorry and our good goodbyes as well as our warm hellos. The fruit of the spirit will be seen as we, like Peter, burn with love for the crowd around us and like him "must, absolutely must make it clear to them what God is offering through faith in Christ." (Jane Williams)

God is moving in this place. It's a bit scary for you and me. But because God is good we can join in with the churches most ancient cry "Come holy Spirit" and then to see where the wind takes us.

AMEN