**Acts 2.1-21p.101
John 15.26- 16.7 p.94
19th May 2024

 The Gift of Pentecost**

There were many wonderful moments during the opening ceremony of the London Olympics. I particularly loved the dramatic presentation of the NHS as being one of the defining characteristics of the United Kingdom. Another was the shower of billions of small pieces of paper that descended upon those fortunate enough to have a seat in the stadium on opening night. In fact, 7 billion bits of paper floated down, representing every person on the planet in 2012. Today you’d have to cut up 8 billion pieces of paper.

Well, the next week we attended day one of the track and field events at the Olympics and although the stewards had done their best to sweep up these bits of paper, Rachel found four still under her seat, took them home and made them into bookmarks for us. Here’s mine. A rather wonderful reminder of a wonderful day. Also, a token that this gift from the sky, as it fluttered down, was for me in a way. I was one of the 7 billion here in 2012, and its great to still have the bookmark today.

The symbolic narrative of Pentecost, for me, resonates with that Olympic spectacle. A shower from above and a gift for everyone. No one left out.

Well, we normally think of gifts at the Festival of Epiphany when we recall the gold, frankincense, and myrrh of The Magi. Yet the Festival of Pentecost, an ancient Harvest Festival in the Jewish tradition, is about gifts too. The gifting of the Spirit, God in action, the living presence of God now understood to be present everywhere and at any time.

This morning I thought we might focus on the way the Gift of the Spirit brings three foundational qualities into our lives as we seek to be followers of Jesus.

And the first is compassion.

# There’s an ancient Latin church prayer, 1200 years old and often used on Maundy Thursday that is sometimes set to great music that goes: *ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est.* Where there is charity and love, God is there too.Isn’t that a great thought, that wherever we encounter compassion we are meeting God. That’s the activity of the Holy Spirit in our world.So many accounts in The Acts of the Apostles celebrate this. Occasions like Peter and John postponing their visit to the Temple so that they might help a lame man begging on its steps. Disciples of Jesus who didn’t look the other way but held out a hand of love and compassion.

# Count Leo Tolstoy was one of the greatest novelists of the 19th century. He had a spiritual awakening in his 30s and became a Christian pacifist who campaigned for change and peace using non-violent means. He’s said to have greatly influenced Ghandi and Martin Luther King. He wrote very long books like *War and Peace* yet he also penned a charming short story about compassion. It’s about Martin, a cobbler who works in a basement with a small widow at head hight. Martin has lost his wife and son, in fact he’s lost all meaning in his life. Yet he constantly looks out of his small window and knows just about everyone who walks by because of their shoes. In his despair a friend calls and encourages him to read the bible. After a few months of doing this he senses God speaks to him in his prayers one night and says tomorrow God will visit him.All day he looks out of his tiny window waiting for God. As the sun begins to set God still hasn’t shown up. Yet Martin sees a man in battered boots stand right outside, blocking his view from the window. It’ Stephen, an old soldier known to Martin, He’s rubbing his hands because he’s so cold. Martin invites him in, gives him bread and tea, and even sends him on his way with his second overcoat. Yet all the time, Martin glances anxiously at the window hoping that God would turn up.Before bed, disappointed at God’s *no show* he takes down his Bible and reads the passage in which Jesus says, *whenever you show love to someone, whenever you give them food and water in my name, it’s as if you are serving me.*In his prayers that night he senses that God tells him he had been in Martin’s basement workshop that day. For as he showed compassion to old Stephen, he was in fact serving God.

# Well, of course Tolstoy’s story has been reworked many times because it contains a foundational truth: Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est. Where there is charity and love, God the Holy Spirit is there. Now, another quality which The Spirit gifts is surely perseverance.Normally, whenever we use that word, we think of it as a purposeful choice. I mean we all know that when life presents us with forks in the road, we have a choice which way we go, and the easiest road may not be the best direction of travel. Many decisions in life take perseverance, endurance and perhaps even a touch of stubbornness.Whilst out preaching in Philippi Paul and Silas don’t find success on every street corner but overt opposition. Like so many first century Christians they were persecuted. And that must, at first, have been an odd experience for Paul. In his younger life he seems to have had a certain amount of privilege. He was educated at the feet of a leading Rabbi, and he lived on the right side of the tracks as a Roman citizen. In his early adult life, he wielded power and carried death warrants. Yet this was the life he’d left behind when he embraced Christianity. He chose to be a follower of The Way – as the Church was originally called. And when that way became so very different from his comfortable upbringing, he kept on having to choose it. It needed to be a daily choice, to carry on serving Christ.So, once arrested and imprisoned in Philippi, along with Silas, maybe we would have expected to find someone full of doubts and questions about those past decisions. But no. At midnight, in their prison cell, Acts tells us Paul and Silas were singing hymns at the top of their voice. A picture of perseverance, endurance and yes, maybe with a bit of godly stubbornness thrown in for good measure.

# We need the Spirit’s help to persevere in keeping the door open in a broken relationship. We need that help, as do thousands of other innocent people, to persevere in believing that peace with justice is possible in Ukraine, Russia, Gaza and Israel. We pray for God the Spirit to gift us perseverance as we face a terminal illness or support a loved one through it.

# We want to make those good, yet often difficult, choices to keep loving, keep striving, and to keep going and to do that we look again and again to God the Helper, God the Holy Spirit.So, what was that third characteristic? It’s vision. Peter quotes words from the prophet Joel in his Pentecost sermon, he says: *God will pour out his Spirit and your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams.* I appreciate the inclusivity of that! It’s not just the young who get inspired, everyone at any age can be a dreamer and long for a better world.

# Isn’t it a great picture of a certain type of energy, a spirit filled drive that keeps a local church like ours full of hope and conviction. I was once speaking to some friends about a renaissance that seemed to happen at their church. They told me things had got stuck in a bit of a rut and along came a minister who didn’t seem in any way out of the ordinary and yet things had turned around and picked up, My friends had a lovely phrase for their new pastor’s ministry, they said it was as if he *had shown them all how to open the windows and let the air back in.*I think that’s the blessing of God the Spirit. And when we open the windows and air comes in a new energy becomes apparent in a local church. People start getting ideas and find enthusiasm. Or as Joel put it and Peter recycled it: *the young see visions and the old dream dreams.* It’s the wind of the Spirit at work.

# By contrast, we all know what it feels like to be in a stuffy, airless room. And perhaps that’s a picture of any group in which God gets pushed out. Such groups can be filled with prejudice and self-righteousness. Instead of being constructive such groups, both inside and outside the Church, can become destructive. So, I think there’s no finer ministry than that of being a window opener and letting the breath of the Holy Spirit blow through a congregation so that once again our dreams and visions are grounded in the love and life of God.

# The ministry of God the Holy Spirit, gifting us compassion, perseverance and vision.

# I want to close by telling you about a lovely encounter I had here in the Sanctuary about ten years ago. We had an unexpected visit from the daughter of Donald McMorran, the London architect of our church building, she called in unexpectedly one Friday as she and her husband were passing through Amersham. She wanted to have another look at the church ‘Dad built’. One of the lovely moments of her visit was being able to show her the chalice we still use at Communion – it was a gift made by her parents to our church on the completion of the building in October 1962. It has an inscription on the base recording their names. She loved seeing it and hearing that it’s a gift that has been in constant use now for over sixty years.During this life you and I will never live a single day without needing God’s gift of the Spirit. Every day we need that gift. Every day we’ll use that gift. The Spirit who helps us love with compassion and serve with perseverance. The Spirit who spends a lifetime teaching us to think and pray with vision and hope.This gift never becomes redundant or outdated – it is a gift in constant use.So, on Pentecost Sunday thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 14th May 2024*