

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon for Pentecost Sunday 31 May 2020  
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

## **THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON**



### **Pentecost Sunday 31 May 2020**

Recorded in Advance Wednesday 27 May 2020

### **ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER**

**ACTS 2: 1-21**

**1 CORINTHIANS 12: 3-13**

**JOHN 20: 19-23**

"You couldn't make it up" is an exaggerated saloon bar cliché in 21<sup>st</sup> century London. But in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost that same phrase would have been an understatement to describe the extraordinary supernatural happenings recorded in our first reading today from Acts.

For the manifestation of the Holy Spirit at that Feast of Pentecost heralded the coming of a new spiritual power to transform lives.

This power is just as relevant to our contemporary time of Coronavirus as it was to the Biblical time of the life and resurrection of Jesus.

It is an uncomfortable fact that the coming of the Holy Spirit is often preceded by fear.

We might think that the first Christian Pentecost began not with the words of today's reading from Acts but with the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary:

"Do not be afraid Mary.....the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you".

No wonder Mary was frightened as a young girl in the age when unmarried mothers were stoned to death in the hill country of Judea.

But she accepted the Holy Spirit with holy obedience.

Today with the wisdom of history and hindsight we can see that The Holy Spirit responsible for the birth of Jesus was the same Holy Spirit responsible for the birth of the Church.

And there was fear around at both.

In the run up to original Pentecost the disciples were often fearful, locked away in an Upper Room trembling with worries about what was going to happen to them.

The Ascension which ended with them looking up in the sky must have left them confused and emotionally exhausted.

All they had to hang on to were the last words of Jesus to them before he vanished from their sight into the clouds.

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem....." (Acts 1:8)

What did these mysterious words mean? A few days later the Disciples found out:

- Wind like a tornado
- Tongues of fire hanging over their heads
- Speaking to the multinational crowd in a variety of languages
- Creating so much energy, excitement and passion that they were accused at being drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning.

If tabloid newspapers had been around in Jerusalem the most appropriate headline might perhaps have been an enormous one word spread across the front page:

WOW!

What can we learn today from this astonishing 'wow' moment on the original day of Pentecost?

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Like those Disciples in 1st century Jerusalem we are in a moment of high anxiety here and now in 21<sup>st</sup> century London.

Coronavirus pandemic has brought both curses and blessings.

But its strongest message to both our society and to our churches is that a wind of change, perhaps a mighty rushing tornado of change is going to produce many different answers to the question:

"How, then, Shall We Live?"

From the church's point of view some of the sign posts towards change are encouraging.

Last week the *Financial Times* published a six-page article by its Chief Feature writer Henry Manse headlined:

*"Keeping the Faith"*

One particular sentence by the writer struck a deep chord with me.

"The Coronavirus crisis may be unprecedented but as with previous moments of turbulence it has triggered a search for the Divine".

Perhaps several of us have had our own experiences of that search.

Personally I had a bumpy ride as a result of my own searching struggles with the Covid-19 infection.

While my wife Elizabeth's battleship strength immune system has kept her safe from the disease even after both her carer and her husband had gone down with it I was initially poleaxed Coronavirus for four days in late March with a high fever of between 102-104°F.

Then for the next four weeks I had the gastric version of the infection which after multiple stomach upsets left me debilitated and anaemic with such a low haemoglobin count that I had to be given iron infusions.

While I was in hospital for these treatments I ran a gauntlet of tests including a heart electrocardiogram test.

This revealed to my astonishment and to my cardiologist's astonishment that I had suffered a heart attack two weeks ago.

The doctor who broke this to me did say with some excitement:

"You are an extremely interesting case Mr Aitken. The number of heart attack cases caused by Covid-19 are still rare.

In fact, in this hospital you are only our fourth Coronavirus heart attack patient."

"What happened to the other three?" I asked.

Long pause.

"I'm afraid they died."

Well this grateful survivor knows whose help pulled him through.

As the Psalmist wrote in the opening verse of Psalm 121:

*"My help cometh even from the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth."*

The Lord who made heaven and earth has clearly been on the move in his church throughout the Coronavirus crisis.

That FT article was full of remarkable new information. It quoted many priests from all denominations reporting a big upsurge in the numbers of their virtual congregations. We believe that is true here at St Matthew's Westminster.

But at churches where they count their numbers carefully the news is rather extraordinary.

For example, there is a church St Mary's Peterborough where the Sunday congregation has increased 10 fold in the new virtual congregations.

At Holy Trinity Brompton it's marriage preparation course normally has between 80-100 engaged couples attending it.

Since the lockdown 6,200 couples have signed on for the online version of the course.

What are such signs telling us?

At least we should be asking the question.

If the church is going to change how should it change?

But here are two ideas for us to consider:

First we must move with the times on information technology. Most churches our own included have been behind the curve on this.

The Zooming, streaming and Skyping facilities of our age are not the only ways to feed the spiritually hungry but they are new tools for doing so and we must get up to date and professional in our use of them.

Secondly, we should resolve on this Day of Pentecost that we will open our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit asking ourselves the challenging question:

“Are we prepared to become a Spirit Filled Church?”

Now I am well aware that in the Catholic tradition many noses start to wrinkle at the mention of the phrase “Spirit filled Church” or even at the mention of “movements of the Holy Spirit”.

This is slightly surprising.

After all every time we say our prayers of the people here at SMW we begin with the introductory words:

“In the power of the Spirit and in Union with Christ”.

But do we mean it?

We used to mean it but alas there are too many indications that the Church Militant of our historic past has become the Church Reticent of our secular present.

Too many Anglicans secretly and perhaps self-righteously look down on our brothers and sisters on all those Evangelical, Charismatic, Pentecostal and Black Churches.

If we are to honour Jesus's teachings in John's Gospel that we should all be one as he and his Father are one we need to react inclusively and cooperatively with spirit filled churches while honouring our different traditions.

Such inclusivity is one of the most important messages of Pentecost, and of our reading today.

Because what happened in Jerusalem on the original Day of Pentecost symbolised a new unity in the spirit transcending all the known racial, national and linguistic barriers.

Luke, the author of Acts goes out of his way to emphasis the amazingly cosmopolitan nature of the crowd thronging the streets of Jerusalem for this festival.

It is a little difficult for us to grasp this when we hear ancient names like Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Phrygia and Pamphylia and so on.

Updating these names to modern geography and nationalities shows us that the Jews who had come to celebrate the feast were from Iran, Iraq, Turkey, North Africa, Greece, Arabia, Rome - and so on. It was a congregation of all the peoples of the known world at that time.

Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly the inclusive multiracial, multinational, multilingual nature of the new Kingdom of Christ on the Day of Pentecost. And all these disparate peoples were by a supernatural miracle able to understand in their own languages what these poorly educated Galileans were preaching.

Now there is a message for us in this cosmopolitan picture.



For like Jerusalem in Biblical times, London in modern times has become a truly global, multinational, international community.

Perhaps Coronavirus may well have bonded us together as a closer community. Maybe our city will historically be seen as a place which changed especially in its places of worship between the the BC and AC eras of history.

Before Coronavirus and After Coronavirus.

Of course we cannot be sure whether this will be an age, to quote Peter's address to the crowd in Jerusalem:

"When our sons and daughters will prophesy  
Our old men will dream dreams  
And our young men will see visions".

But on this Day of Pentecost 2020 we need to be open to such possibilities.

For a mighty rushing wind of spiritual change is coming towards us. And we must be open to it:

- In our lives
- In our churches
- In our hearts by exploring the new frontiers of our spirit filled faith.

**Amen**