Acts 2: 1-21; Romans 8: 14-17; John 14: 8-17, 25-27

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

So today is the day of Pentecost. And the altar frontal and my vestments are red because red – flames of fire - is the symbolic colour of the Holy Spirit.

I was asked to talk about Pentecost in worship at school last week. And because I go in on Wednesdays, and I knew that the children would already be familiar by then with the Bible story from Monday and Tuesday, we talked instead about the meaning of the word Pentecost, and how it fits into the calendar of the church.

The name ‘Pentecost’ sounds a bit unexciting – we all know about pentagons so it is pretty straightforward to make the connection with the number five. In Pentecost’s case, it’s not five but fifty: counting from Easter, it is forty days to the Ascension of Jesus, which we celebrated a week ago last Thursday. And then there are a further ten days until Pentecost, making a total of fifty from Easter to Pentecost.

And its other name –one we hear much less often these days – is Whit Sunday. There is some debate over what the ‘Whit’ bit means. I asked the children what they thought, and one very small child at the front of the hall wondered if it had to do with the disciples having been told by Jesus to ‘wait’ until the Holy Spirit came to them, which I thought was a great bit of theology as well as a good bit of linguistic manipulation. The theories are: that it might be related to white, given that it was a great day for baptising people, and candidates for baptism wore white; or it might be to do with wit, as in ‘wit and wisdom’, since the coming of the Spirit conferred wisdom and understanding on the disciples.

But that is just a bit of background. One thing we are very clear about from today’s readings is that the coming of the Holy Spirit is something to be anticipated with eagerness and celebrated with joy. Nonetheless, it’s a bit as I said last Sunday: that the bits of God that happened here on earth are somehow easier to nail down, to grasp, but how on earth do we grasp the sense of Holy Spirit? How do we know the Spirit’s presence?

What does scripture say that might be useful to our feeble understanding?

Acts 1:8 – you will receive power..

Luke 24 agrees – Jesus says: I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

Romans 8 – the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

John 14: the Helper

Galatians 5: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We cannot see the Holy Spirit; but we see and feel the effects of the Spirit – the so-called fruits.

And then again, we hear the Holy Spirit variously referred to as: comforter, sustainer (instead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, some people prefer to use creator, redeemer and), advocate, the gift.

You will notice from the pew leaflet this week that I am exhorting you all to come to the confirmation service next Sunday afternoon; confirmations and baptisms are just two particular events when we pray to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit – and we might draw from that prayer an image of God saying to us: I am giving you my ‘energy’. I am giving you a capacity for .. something. The Holy Spirit within us is not a warm fuzzy feeling so much as an energy, a sense of purpose. It enables us to DO something.

But what did the Spirit do on the day of Pentecost? And what is the Spirit wanting to do in and through us today? The message in that passage from Acts of the Apostles is clear: the Holy Spirit’s work is not restricted to the most special and holy among us; rather the Spirit is poured ‘upon all flesh’. The Holy Spirit’s working sphere includes sons as well as daughters, young as well as old, and male and female slaves. The marginalized and the oppressed are equal partners with the privileged. The open and free work of the Spirit subverts the status quo: having unity with like-minded people is an easy task; but being at one with those who disagree with us needs the work of the Spirit. On this day of Pentecost, we have to ask ourselves whether the Spirit is really at work among us, making us humble, non-judgemental, open and inclusive as individuals and as communities.

The second dimension of the work of the Spirit is witness. It was already established that the Spirit would enable the disciples of Jesus to be his witnesses to the end of the earth. The Day of Pentecost was a great day of proclamation of that witness.

And the immediate sign of that outpouring of the Spirit was that the people heard the disciples speaking about God’s deeds and power. A group of fearful disciples who would have preferred to stay behind closed doors had now been empowered to proclaim the Gospel openly and publicly. And the Spirit broke down the barriers of culture and communication.

Pentecost did not make the listeners, who came from various countries, understand the language of the disciples (which was Hebrew). The **out**siders were not being made to conform to the **in**siders.

Instead, ‘Each one heard them speaking in the native language of each’. Because God speaks in all languages. And to all people. And we are called too, to speak to each person we meet in their own language. And that’s not about learning Mandarin or Kiswahili – it is about talking to people in ways they understand. So that they know that God is relevant to them; that something is happening in our lives that is worth sharing. The Holy Spirit was given to empower us in our witness of Jesus Christ, that we might live out this Gospel and proclaim it afresh.

Justin Welby, when he was yet a new Archbishop said ‘It is natural for churches to grow’ – something we often find difficult to believe.  But the way churches grow is by proclaiming the gospel abroad – by what we say and by how we live – at the bus stop, on the train, in shops, among friends and colleagues and family. And we have to be prepared to take risks, to make ourselves vulnerable by opening ourselves to challenge from others about why we believe and what we believe. And we have to have the courage to say ‘Come Holy Spirit’ ourselves - and to mean it.

Incidentally, I was reminded only last night by an episcopal friend that bishops wear silly hats for a reason. And that reason is to call to mind the flames that were seen on the heads of the disciples at Pentecost. Mitres are flame-shaped. Come to the confirmation next Sunday afternoon at 4pm – support, and pray for, and celebrate with our confirmands – with Abi, Claire, Faye, Ginika, Gus, Jennifer, Laura, Matthew, Naomi, Rebecca, Sarah and Sophie – and see the bishop wearing a silly hat for a perfectly sensible reason. And pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit, that we might **all** do the work that God has called us, and will equip us, to do.

**Let us pray:** Heavenly Father, pour upon us the gift of your Holy Spirit.  Break us, melt us, mould us to be your people, a living sign of your love.  When we are fearful, make us courageous; when we are waiting for something to happen, awake in us the nature of our calling as your servants. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of all your people.

**Amen**