

SERMON – 28/5/23**Pentecost**

Acts 2:1-13

Address (part 1)

There are three great festivals in the Christian calendar. Ask people to name them and just about anyone will say Christmas. You don't have to be a regular churchgoer to know the story of the coming of God's Son into the world as a baby, born of a young girl and laid in a manger. Ask what the second great festival is and most churchgoers will speak about Easter, although fewer outside the church might think about it or if they do they will have a harder job remembering much more than the basic outline of the story of Jesus' death on the Cross and His rising again on the third day. But if you ask even those who are quite active in the church what the third great Christian festival is, not everyone will mention Pentecost and those who do may have a hard time describing what happened and an even harder time explaining what it was all about.

We'll come to our Bible reading in a few minutes but before we read about what actually happened on the Day of Pentecost, I want to begin this morning by exploring a story with you from the Old Testament Book of Numbers. Although it's in the Bible, many of you may never have noticed this story before and those who have read it before are quite likely to have forgotten all about it. That was certainly the case for me until I was reminded of it last week.

Wind the clock back to the time immediately after the people of Israel had escaped from slavery in Egypt through the waters of the Sea. Finding themselves in the Sinai Desert with a long and dangerous journey ahead of them to the Promised Land, it wasn't long before the grumbling started. Many of the people wished they were back in Egypt – although they were slaves at least they had food and drink. But God provided for them – manna, bread from heaven, and fresh water gushing from a rock. How amazing was God's provision, but people being people the grumbling soon began again.

In Numbers ch.11 we read: "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!' The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin. The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a hand-mill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into loaves. And it tasted like something made with olive oil. When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down." (Num.11:4-9)

Moses was troubled by their grumbling and when he took the matter before God, the Lord told him to call together 70 of the people's elders so that they could be given a share of the power of the Spirit that God had given to Moses and share the burden the Moses had been carrying alone. He was also to tell the people: "The LORD heard you when you wailed, 'If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!' Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month – until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it – because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" (Numbers 11:18-20)

Now even Moses couldn't believe that God was capable of giving the people that much meat in the middle of the desert but when the 70 elders came before the Lord, we're told that they received the Holy Spirit and they proclaimed the greatness of God. It was only a very temporary experience but it was the precursor to the miracle that the Lord was about to do.

The account goes on as follows: "Now a wind went out from the LORD and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to a metre deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction. All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail." (Num. 11:31-32)

But there's one other little detail in the story and that concerns two of the elders who didn't make it to the meeting with Moses – their names were Eldad and Medad. When the other elders

received the Holy Spirit in the Tent of Meeting, these two also received the Spirit out in the camp and they proclaimed the wonders of God and went on proclaiming God's greatness even after the other elders had stopped. A messenger ran and told Moses what was going on and Moses' assistant, Joshua, said, "'Moses, my lord, stop them!' But Moses replied, 'Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!'" (Num.11:29)

That's why I wanted to share that story this morning, because as we come to the account of what happened on the Day of Pentecost some 1500 years later we see Moses' longing come to fruition. 'I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them.'

Address (part 2)

So, Moses had been longing for this day hundreds of years earlier. In the intervening years prophets had been speaking about the coming of the Spirit of God – Isaiah spoke about the Spirit who would come upon the Lord's anointed, the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD. Jeremiah spoke about the Lord putting the law in people's minds and writing it on their hearts and about people from the greatest to the least *knowing* God; Joel prophesied the Holy Spirit being poured out on *all* people, men and women dreaming dreams from God, old and young seeing visions from God and the wonders of God being seen. Jesus too had spoken about the gift that God would give – the Advocate, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth – as He left them to return to heaven He commanded them to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Gift, when just as they had been baptised with water so they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit.

And now the long-awaited time had come. The first Christians were gathered together for worship just as today we are together, some here in the church, some online, all of us united with the worldwide Church and our fellow-believers down through the ages right back to Moses and the redeemed people of Israel in the desert of Sinai.

What might it have been like? In describing the scene in the Book of Acts, Luke finds it hard to pin down what actually happened: 'Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.' (Acts 2:2-4). Pilgrims who were in Jerusalem from all over the known world heard the noise but could all hear the praises of God being declared in their own language. I don't imagine any of the disciples could have foreseen what was going to happen when they were told to wait for the gift God had promised through Jesus.

We are no less unsure than our forebears were about how God will act today. We do not know how the Lord may respond as we wait this morning. But perhaps we are rather less expectant that there will be signs of the Lord's moving among us this Pentecost. What if there were a sound here today like a blowing of a violent wind? What if something like tongues of fire were spotted? What if some people in the congregation started declaring the wonders of God, perhaps even in words that people didn't understand? Perhaps, like Joshua asking Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying, we would also be inclined to stifle anything that took us out of our comfort zone. Perhaps we would be fearful of things getting out of hand and act instead to restore order. Perhaps, as at the first Pentecost, some people might think that we had had too much to drink and write us off.

But, at a time when most of the population have written the church off as a complete irrelevance, maybe we need to be much more open to the coming of the Holy Spirit among us in our day. We can accept the idea of God coming to us in the Christmas story – a baby, that's manageable, that's cute. Maybe we can even accept the idea of God coming to us in the Easter story – God with us in the midst of suffering, God's promise to us even in the face of death, that's hopeful, it's something to hang onto when things are looking tough.

But what about God coming to us in the message of Pentecost? Here's where most of us get cold feet because, frankly, we are

scared of letting go of the familiar and allowing God potentially to lead us somewhere we don't know; we are scared of the irrational and the supernatural and entrusting ourselves to One we do not fully understand; we are scared of getting caught up in something much bigger than ourselves. And yet what I have just described is actually the very definition of faith: going where we can't be certain; trusting One who is beyond us; being prepared to do more than we could have imagined.

That is what happened that first Pentecost – a bunch of frightened, clueless, unreliable weaklings were taken up in the purposes of God and enabled to turn the world upside down in the power of the Holy Spirit. There were probably just over 100 people there when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost – that's fewer than there are in this building this morning. They were the *only* Christians in the whole world and yet within a single generation the message had been taken right across the Roman world and beyond. We are just *one* group of Christians even in this one community yet most of us don't have the faith to believe we can make an impact on our own neighbourhood.

So let me ask you – are you ready to trust God, to receive the gift that Jesus has promised, and to allow the Holy Spirit to be unleashed within you and among us as a fellowship? Just what can God do here in these days? Let's trust the Lord and see.

Come, Holy Spirit.