



Opening Responses for Pentecost

God declares: 'Do not be afraid, for I am with you'.

Come, Holy Spirit! Gather us together in your presence.

God declares: 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people'.

Come, Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful people.

God declares: 'Then all who call on my name will be saved'.

Come, Holy Spirit! Kindle in us the fire of your love.

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What three words would you choose to describe the Holy Spirit, and why would you choose them?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Blessed are you, creator God,
to you be praise and glory forever!
As your Spirit moved over the face of the waters,
bringing light and life to your creation,
pour out your Spirit on us today
that we may walk as children of light,
and by your grace, reveal your presence.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God forever! Amen

Verses from Psalm 104 (Singing the Faith 824)

Prayers of Renewal

As the first disciples gathered together,
the Holy Spirit appeared among them,
in tongues of fire and in rushing wind,
bringing refreshment and renewal,
and transforming frightened men and women
into people ready to proclaim Jesus Christ,
who died and rose again, to set us free to love.

Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Our bodies easily become sluggish, and our energy gets low:
come, Holy Spirit, and breathe new life into us!

Our minds easily become closed, and locked into old ways:
come, Holy Spirit, and breathe new life into us!

Our hearts easily become hard, immune to the pain of others:
come, Holy Spirit, and breathe new life into us!

Our churches easily become anxious, and afraid to change:
come, Holy Spirit, and breathe new life into us!

Our world easily becomes messy, and burdened by injustice:
come, Holy Spirit, and breathe new life into us!

God of new beginnings,
of love stronger than even death,
send your Holy Spirit to fire our imaginations,
and breathe new life into our dry bones.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and set us free to live life to the full.

Amen

Reading

Acts 2:1 – 21

Sermon

One of the great sadnesses of Church history is that the Holy Spirit, despite being absolutely key to Christian theology, has been treated as the poor cousin of the Trinity. The Spirit is present at the creation of all there is, brooding on the waters, and waiting to give birth to all the Word will say, as the beautiful Iona hymn puts it. She cannot be contained, and is described as wind, breath, and spirit in all three of the key biblical languages – Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. When the first human was brought to life, it is God breathing out the Holy Spirit which transforms that made from the dust of the earth into Adam, a creature made in God's image, and with the capacity to love, and to be loved by, God. That same Spirit anointed the greatest king of the people of Israel when earthy eyes failed to recognise David's heart, brought new life to those dry bones Ezekiel saw in that dusty valley, and whose words were spoken by courageous Prophets who called God's people to live up to their vocation to embody God's love, hope and justice for all the nations to see. She liberates us to stand where Jesus stands and know God as our Father, and to proclaim new life in the name of Jesus Christ. And yet, for all of this, Pentecost stands neglected in many settings, and the Spirit is so often an afterthought in our theology, rather than at the heart of our God-speech.

Now, there are good reasons why this might be the case. For many centuries of the Church, the doctrine of the Trinity was seen through a hierarchical lens, with the Father at the top of the pile and the Holy Spirit firmly at the bottom. It is harder to relate to an abstract Person, in the form of the Spirit, than the concrete human form of Jesus and the 'old man with a beard' figure so often projected onto the Father. Sadly, I suspect that the feminine language and imagery used amid the pages of the Bible and more modern hymnody has also fed into this marginalisation of the Holy Spirit. It is really only in the twentieth

century – with the revitalisation of Trinitarian theology, pioneered by two famous Karls (Barth and Rahner) – that the Holy Spirit has been taken more seriously. Consequently, it is important that we respond by engaging with the Feast of Pentecost, because today's passage offers us such a rich testimony to the power of love to change hearts and transform our world in that process. The dreams we dream and visions we see will look rather different if they are saturated with the dangerous, passionate, all-embracing love of God than if they're not and so, today, I invite you to wonder at the work of the Holy Spirit.

As Luke tells the story, at his ascension, Jesus had told the disciples to stay put in Jerusalem and wait to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would equip them, and make them ready to be witnesses to his resurrection throughout the world. One can only imagine how those men and women all felt, praying together, and watching and waiting. They'd witnessed their friend being betrayed by Judas – one of their own – and dying in unimaginable pain upon the cross at Calvary as one condemned, as little better than a common criminal. Just as this was all beginning to sink in, they then had to get their heads around something so unbelievable that it took several goes for them to dare to trust that it just *might* be true: true that God's unstoppable love is stronger even than death, true that Jesus really was risen. Then his ascension, forty days later, meant although they knew he was alive, they also knew he'd never be physically present among them in the same way again. That is an awful lot for anyone to deal with, in such a short space of time. Nevertheless, the disciples *did* stay together, and patiently waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

By Jesus' day, Pentecost had become a major period of celebration for the Jewish people. It was the Festival of Weeks, which had much in common with our own harvest festival. It took place fifty days after Passover, in which God's liberating actions, in bringing Israel out of slavery within Egypt, were remembered. As such, it was viewed as a time of new beginnings and of fresh hopes, of thankfulness for the

outpouring of God's goodness that the people had experienced and continued to enjoy. If ever there was a good time for something new and spectacular to happen, this was clearly it, and what did happen that morning was like a deeper level of reality that's normally hidden below the surface breaking through. The effects were profound and, yet, it is easy to be cynical about stories like this, just like the crowds who dismissed the transformation in the first disciples and put these events down to drunkenness. However, when the Spirit came down, in 'tongues of fire' and like a 'rushing wind', the change in Peter was spectacular. Gone was the coward, who denied three times he even knew Jesus in order to save his own skin! In his place was someone able to take on the crowds, and proclaim that the death-defying love of God has been revealed to the whole world – to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles alike – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ by God from the dead. *This* is the power of love, unleashed by the Spirit, as she revealed the hidden potential Jesus always knew was there.

There's power in love. Love sets people free across deep divides of gender and status to dream dreams, see visions of hope and justice and new beginnings, and to make them happen. The power of love, unleashed in such spectacular fashion at Pentecost, cannot be kept down, and Michael Curry hits the nail upon the head when he notes that if we ever learn to harness the energy of this love then humanity will have discovered fire for the second time in history. When seeing the abuse of power, to furnish the pockets of wealthy friends, among the political classes, and the way the pandemic has heightened the divisions in British society, it is all too easy to become deeply cynical and to wonder if the story of Pentecost is simply too good to be true. It is also easy to get no further than merely *talking* about the love of God, and indeed change-making is not easy; it cost Jesus the cross. Yet if we dare not risk dreaming dreams and seeing visions, we step back from Spirit who would sweep us straight up into the dangerous, passionate, lifegiving, death-defying sky-scraping dance right at the

heart of God. The Holy Spirit is the 'enemy of apathy' and the gift of the eternal Son, drawing us into that same pattern revealed through the Scriptures as being that of life, liberation, renewal and justice.

If all of this sounds rather intimidating, it is worth us just pausing to remember that the first disciples did not have the benefit of hindsight as they gathered to pray in that upper room. They did not know how things would work out, but they *did* trust in Jesus' promise to be with them always, to the end of the age. It's true, we might not encounter God in tongues of fire or rushing winds (though you never know) but it doesn't mean that God isn't working in and through us, to open up new possibilities and to unleash transformation. The power of divine love, manifested through the Holy Spirit, sets people free across the things which so often divide us to dream dreams, catch God's vision of hope and justice and radical love and new beginnings, and hence make amazing things happen. With that in mind, let us pray:

Come, Holy Spirit: fill the hearts of your faithful people,
and kindle in us the fire of your love,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayers of Intercession and The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

May the Holy Spirit, who comes to us in tongues of fire,
and brings sweeping winds of change,
liberate us from the bonds of sin
to share in the blessings of Christ,
as we stand before God the Father.
And may that very same blessing always remain upon us,
and all whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore. **Amen**