

Sunday, 24 May 2026 – The Feast of Pentecost - Ian Wallis

Pentecost is the festival celebrated fifty days after Easter. It commemorates the moment the followers of Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit, evoked in our readings as a rushing wind or as tongues of fire. Ian Wallis reflects on how something intangible can also be a life-changing experience

Readings:

Acts 2: 1-21. John 20, 19-23

Sermon: The Feast of Pentecost – Ian Wallis

Come with me to the parish of St Aethelred the Unready in which there was situated a very prim and proper all girls private school at which the local vicar, the Revd Reginald Seaworthy, was often invited to conduct morning worship.

After one such occasion, the headmistress requested a word in private. In the confines of her study, she informed him of her predicament. The final year students would shortly be leaving. Miss DeMeanour, the biology teacher, was off sick, following an unfortunate incident in the science lab involving a dead catfish and a scalpel, thereby creating a dilemma: Who was going to speak to the girls about the birds and bees before their departure – you know, the facts of life, the wonders of procreation, ‘knowing’ someone in a biblical sense and the rest? At that very moment, the headmistress fixed the vicar in her gaze and made her intention clear. After considerable prevarication on his part and persuasion on hers, he eventually conceded and a date was set.

On the day in question, the vicar, feeling rather bashful about his task and without giving due consideration to his alibi, informed his wife that he had been invited to give a lecture at St Aethelred’s on the art of sailing – much to her bemusement given his almost complete lack of experience and knowledge of the subject. Be that as it may, off he went and the deed was done. As it happened, sometime afterwards, the headmistress bumped into the vicar’s wife and immediately started to sing his praises for such an authoritative and well-informed lecture. ‘That does surprise me’, the vicar’s wife interjected, ‘after all, he’s only done it twice: the first time he was sick and the second time it blew his hat off!’

I suppose every generation and culture has its taboo ‘no-go’ subjects and I sometimes wonder whether among congregations of intelligent worshippers who like to be in control of their religion, the Holy Spirit can be counted among them. After all, according to the Bible, the Spirit can be unpredictable, uncontainable, unfathomable, unstoppable. It causes people to do strange things. It doesn’t observe protocols and readily transgresses boundaries of culture, class and creed.

We had a good example of this in our first reading where the apostles appear to become intoxicated with divine presence, overcoming their reservations, giving them confidence to share the good news they had discovered and capacity to communicate it to those whose native languages they neither spoke nor understood.

Not very C of E, you might say! Too much emotionally charged, intellectually unmoderated enthusiasm, verging on hysteria. And yet, according to the author of the Acts of the Apostles as well as the writings of the apostle Paul and many others, it is Holy Spirit that indwells and animates the life of the early Jesus movement – just as it had, according to the Gospels, indwelt and animated the ministry of Jesus. If you recall, it was on the occasion of his

baptism by John that Jesus experienced another baptism – this time, not an outward symbolic washing, but rather an inward spiritual resourcing: confirming his vocation, empowering his ministry.

In fact, as we discover through the pages of the New Testament, if Christian identity is defined by Jesus Christ, Christian community is constituted and animated by the Holy Spirit. So, on this Feast of Pentecost – this Feast of the Holy Spirit – the first thing we need to recognise and hopefully celebrate is that the Holy Spirit is not, as we would say today, an optional extra, but a defining characteristic of being Christian.

And yet if this is the first thing to recognise then it is quickly followed by a second, namely, that the Holy Spirit can seem elusive and enigmatic. For one, it is extrasensory – we cannot see it, smell it, touch it, hear it, taste it. For another, it is immaterial – it has no weight or form; nor can it be located in space or time. And, again, it is superfluous in the sense that we can account for almost every cause and effect within the universe without recourse to it. In the light of this, it is tempting to wonder whether it exists at all, but that is because we are looking for it in the wrong place. The Holy Spirit is not encountered out there in the physical universe, but in here. It inhabits the world of human experience – and is no less real for that.

Let me offer a partial analogy. You are looking at a painting by Fra Angelico or Della Francesca or a sculpture by Michelangelo or Auguste Rodin or listening to a symphony by Beethoven or a concerto by Bach, when you become overwhelmed with such beauty that it takes your breath away, elevating you to heightened levels of consciousness and connectedness. Where does this beauty reside – in the painting, in the sculpture, in the musical score or its performance? Or is it in the experience of the perceiver? And, if it is in the latter, does that render it unreal or just belonging to a different dimension of reality?

This is where the Holy Spirit makes its presence felt – in human experience (probably, the experience of other creatures too). And according to the witness of the Acts of the Apostles and many other early Christian writings, it is profound, extraordinary human experience of a particular type that accounts for why the early Jesus movement didn't die out with the death of its founder.

Well, if this is the case, what can we deduce about the quality and character of early Christian experience of the Holy Spirit? Briefly, let me mention three characteristics.

Firstly, it is personal in the sense that it is experienced first-hand and, as such, is intensely subjective and intimate. As a related aside, this is where some attempts to account for Jesus' resurrection by deducing it from an empty tomb go astray. At the most, an empty tomb evidences where Jesus isn't – that's the sum of it. On the contrary, the conviction that Jesus was alive is rooted in personal experience – first-hand experience communicated by the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, although experience of the Holy Spirit is essentially personal, it is also interpreted experience – experience that is understood and accounted for in a particular way. At least two interpretative filters are at play here. For those who knew Jesus personally, they could correlate their experience with what they experienced in his company beforehand. We see this correlation attested in the resurrection appearances of the Gospels, where Jesus is identified through experiences characteristic of their time together before his death:

- For Mary Magdalene, it was a renewed experience of acceptance and entrusting;
- For Peter, it was a renewed experience of forgiveness and commissioning;
- For Cleopas and his companion, it was a renewed experience of presence and communion through a shared meal;

- For other disciples, as we heard in our Gospel reading, it was a renewed experience of peace.

In this way, experiences emblematic of their time with Jesus before his death supply an interpretive filter for experiences post-mortem.

The second interpretative framework for experiences of the Holy Spirit is the Bible which for the early Jesus movement was the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures – what would become the Christian Old Testament.

If you recall from our passage in Acts, we find Peter turning to Joel’s account of the Day of the Lord, where the prophet envisages what it will be like to live in God’s sovereign presence, to account for what they were experiencing. To quote:

*In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,
and they shall prophesy.*

Is this way, early Christian experience is rooted in a momentum of faith – in story, community and expectation – where it is imbued with meaning and legitimacy.

Thirdly and finally, early Christian experience of the Holy Spirit is transformational – although subjective and personal, it engenders genuine change in outlook, lifestyle and practice. For example, as we read in the opening chapters of Acts, the earliest disciples’ experience of the Holy Spirit convinces them that Jesus is a living presence and good news for everyone – giving them courage to share that conviction with others, creating communities shaped by Jesus’ teaching and example.

Drawing are explorations together suggests that the early church emerges from a particular quality of human experience, interpreted in the light of Jesus and the Scriptures, giving rise to communities of transformation and renewal – communicating the presence of Christ. Framed in this way, it may sound as if something of vital importance is missing – and that is because, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Pentecost is not ultimately a human achievement, but a divine act of grace: the Holy Spirit inhabiting, animating, empowering human beings who are open and receptive to an outpouring of gratuitous superfluity.

As we have noted, it may not be possible to isolate the Holy Spirit and analyse it scientifically; but it is possible to study its effects – such as, the emergence, appeal and flourishing of the early Jesus movement. But more than that, we can experience the Holy Spirit for ourselves by sharing in the life of a Christian community, where each of us is invited to participate in a quality of human experience shaped by the living memory of Jesus - communicated through scripture and tradition, enlivened by worship and sacrament, embodied in community, service and sacred space – a quality of human experience that can be compelling, challenging, satisfying in equal measure – shaping who we are and what we do, as well as how we relate to others and respond to the world.

To my mind, this is where the enduring truth of Pentecost resides – not in what happened in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, but in what continues to happen in Christian communities around the globe. That’s sufficient evidence of Pentecost for me – and I rejoice in being able to

belong to such a community and trust you do too. Hopefully, it won't cause us any upset stomachs – but, I suspect, a few hats might get blown off along the way.

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