

SERMON AT ST GEORGE'S, PARKTOWN

SUNDAY 24th MAY 2026

PENTECOST

Readings:

Acts 2:1-21 The Holy Spirit comes to the first apostles and Peter addresses them

Psalms 104 Rejoice in the Lord

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 There are varieties of spiritual gifts

John 20:19-23 Jesus appears to the disciples

Today is Pentecost. 'Pentecost' is a derivative, Greek-based word which was used to denote the Jewish harvest festival that occurred every year 50 days (or seven x seven, plus one) after the Passover.

There are numerous words in the English language that have *penta* or *pente* as prefixes to them. Examples are pentagon and pentagram or pentateuch. Usually, these are Hellenistic words that are connected to the numerical concept of five.

Attending a talk by the Dendrological Society (of which I am a member), I was told that nature has a singular affinity for five. Think of the digits of hands and feet of so many mammals and the roseate shape of the bloom of so many plants. Apparently, these 'fives' efficiently combine functional diversity with strength. It is likely that this phenomenon would have been noticed and considered significant by the ancient Hebrews.

Perhaps ironically, the significance of the designation 'Pentecost' in the Christian calendar is the fact that the disciples had gathered together on that day without expecting the extraordinarily momentous events of that day.

The Pentecostal account in Acts may have been embellished somewhat for dramatic effect. Don't worry about that. Tongue-in-cheek, we may say 'The devil is in the detail'. Scripture was written as stories to be heard by audiences not historical narratives to be read privately 'in the comfort of one's own home'. This is a view that I respectfully share with Rowan Williams, for more than a century and half the most intellectual of recent Archbishops of Canterbury (see his *God with Us*). As Anglicans, we are not Biblical literalists.

What are undoubtedly true are the facts that (a) the disciples came to a heightened awareness of the Holy Spirit and (b) they understood that the Christian message was to be freely available to all people, for all time and (c) from there, they went out into the world to build this great church, the body of Christ, our Lord. The Spirit has indeed been poured out on all flesh.

Among the joys of Pentecost is that the disciples came to understand that faith in the risen Christ knows no barriers of race or nationality. On this day the disciples became aware of the mighty power that the Holy Spirit may have as a transcendent force. Think Pentecost, think Holy Spirit.

If one were to conduct a 'straw poll' among Christians, never mind the general public, as to which is the most important day in the Christian Calendar, it is probable that many would say Christmas, others Easter.

It is, however, not difficult to construct an argument that Pentecost may be the most important day in the Christian calendar. The reason is that it both affirms and confirms the Resurrection.

There would be no Christianity without: (a) Jesus being born into this world; (b) his Resurrection following his crucifixion and (c) the spread of the gospel through the working of the Holy Spirit among ordinary human

beings. There is a 'trinity' of sorts among these three. Together, they make up an indivisible whole. It has been the spread of the gospel that gives our religion its vitality but this would not have happened without the Resurrection, which, in turn, could not have occurred without Jesus's life and ministry on Earth.

In our Anglican calendar Pentecost and the days following immediately thereafter make up the longest of the seasons and focuses upon the working of the Holy Spirit through the disciples. In our worship we Anglicans like to be reminded of the beauty of holiness and to be in awe of the God's majesty. We are nevertheless acutely conscious of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit both in our personal lives and the wider world. We Anglicans may, in fact, be more 'Pentecostal' than we care to believe.

Jesus promised the disciples that when he was no longer physically present on Earth, he would send the Holy Spirit to guide and lead them, that he would be with them, as Spirit, for all time. That promise came true. This is no mumbo-jumbo, no delusion, no make-believe. On Pentecost, the disciples recognised not only the presence the Holy Spirit but, as I have said, also began to understand its mighty power. We all come across this in our daily lives. God, Jesus, is indeed with us all the time. It is that experience that makes us believers, even if we are not sure about the precise detail of what the Resurrection may mean.

In this important aspect of theology, the Pentecostal churches have been streets ahead of the more traditional churches. It is the encounter with the Holy Spirit that matters way above any intellectual reasoning of why we are here on Earth. It is the recognition of the Holy Spirit that separates believers in Christianity from unbelievers. The broad outline of the early ministry of Jesus is largely common cause. The big question is: was this

of and from God? It is a privilege for us to have an awareness of the Holy Spirit. It is readily available to all. We must just not block it out.

If you believe that there is such a thing as the Holy Spirit, it makes all the difference in your life! You have got it made!

More than 50 years ago, I listened to an outstanding sermon on the Holy Spirit by the Very Revd Ted King, the Dean of Cape Town. He said the easiest way to begin to get a grip on what the Holy Spirit is all about is to look at friendship. Friendship is the Holy Spirit – although, of course, the Holy Spirit is much more than that. Using the language of lawyers and sociologists, the Holy Spirit includes but is not limited to friendship. The Spirit is ‘the Lord, the giver of life’, the comforter, the hidden God, the *Deus absconditus* and so on.

Friendship is spirit. It is real, with real consequences, even though it cannot be weighed, measured or counted. It is immune to physical temperatures, whether hot or cold. It cannot be confined. It cannot be bottled or contained. Friendship is not part of the material world.

The benefits of friendship are inestimable. None of us would have achieved what we have without the help, support and good advice of our friends and loved ones. Friendship is not a delusion. So too, neither is the Holy Spirit.

As the reading this morning from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians reminds us, we have varieties of gifts. Friendship magnifies the talents within us and promotes goodness and wellbeing among human beings. That is why, in the long run, good will always triumph over evil. Friendship and mutual cooperation achieve. Big time! Evil destroys, eventually devouring itself.

My sisters and my brothers, there is more good news.

The world has been richly blessed to have a pope of the calibre of Leo XIV. Who can doubt that his messages of peace and goodwill among all the peoples on Earth have already had a special and often saving effect? Not one for theological warfare, he has actively promoted ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, including with those who have no faith at all.

A member of the Order of St Augustine, he is a firm believer in the link between friendship and spiritual formation. The two are mutually reinforcing.

Through regular worship, prayers, reading and reflection, we develop in our spiritual formation. This empowers us to be better friends, parents, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers – kinder, gentler, more compassionate, more understanding and more supportive of one another. Reciprocally, this love nourishes our spiritual formation. A virtuous cycle is set in motion.

Leo has said that among the privileges of being a Christian is an enriching sense of community. More than this, the momentum of our spiritual formation not only makes us better friends to others, but we also derive so much from them, whether it be skills, knowledge, experience or love.

In other words, we do not come to church to make friends: coming to church makes us better friends and better members of our families in our ordinary, everyday lives.

I have recently read a biography of the present pope Leo, written by Elise Ann Allen. The book includes interviews between the author and her subject. I have been much impressed that he has such a clear belief that he is the successor to St Peter, is the Vicar of Christ and, as such, behaves accordingly. This is manifest from his bearing, his immaculate appearance and what he says.

But he fully recognises that, like every human being, he has his strengths and weaknesses. He recognises that he must pray these through, giving leadership on the gospel where he can and receiving expert advice from others – friends and colleagues – whom he trusts, in areas where he needs it. Politically and theologically, the Pope is ‘centrist’ in his leanings. The Pope has affirmed my typically Anglican belief, learned over the years, that each of us must do the best we can in the situations in which we find ourselves. Perfection is not expected of us or others, neither should we despair about our faults and failings.

In Allen’s book he says:

‘I think that being Pope, the successor of Peter, and asked to confirm others in their faith, which is the most important part, is something that can happen only by the grace of God; there’s no other explanation. The Holy Spirit is the only way to explain how I got elected to this office, to this ministry. Because of my faith, because of what I have lived, because of my understanding of Jesus Christ and the gospel, I said ‘Yes. I am here.’ I hope to be able to confirm others in the faith because that is the most fundamental role that the successor of Peter has.’

Confirmed in the faith, we believe that the Holy Spirit is calling us to peace, to new and better horizons in almost every field of human endeavour: science, medicine, law, art, music, culture, physical recreation, our relationships with others and, greatest of all, our love.

Peace be with you!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.