

All Saints Alive

READER'S VIEWPOINT

Pentecost – fire, wind, spirit, power?

Geoffrey Oates considers the Holy Spirit

At the end of May we move on from Easter and into the season of Whitsuntide, or Pentecost. To the Jews, Pentecost was the spring Harvest Festival, and was also understood as a time when new prophetic revelations might be expected from God.

For Christians, it is the time when the Disciples said goodbye to the physical presence of the risen Jesus, and instead came to experience God in a new way, as the Holy Spirit came into their lives.

It sounded like rushing wind, and it looked like tongues of fire, and it gave the twelve Disciples the courage, the boldness and the eloquence to go out and kick-start the evangelisation of the whole world.

'A sound like a rushing wind'; wind, breath and spirit go hand in hand through our scriptures. The Hebrew word 'Ruah' can be translated as the Breath of God, the Wind of God, the Spirit of God. The English 'Spirit' comes from the Latin word 'spirare' – to breathe.

We know that breath is the defining facet of animal life. What breathes is alive, what does not breathe, is dead. The Breath of Life is God's first gift to Adam in the Garden of Eden – whoever lives has the Spirit of God.

The 'Wind of God' doesn't quite have the same ring as 'Breath of God'. Perhaps wind has too many negative associations for us. If someone who talks a lot but has nothing to say, we may call them a windbag. Real wind only really catches our attention when it violent and destructive – hurricanes and tornadoes make good headlines. But it wasn't always like that.

Before the invention of the steamship and the steam locomotive, long distance travel was almost completely dependent on wind. From Columbus to James Cook, the sailors, traders, explorers and imperialists who crossed the oceans and built the links between the cultures and economies of Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia, were powered by wind. There were no timetables for them. A journey began when the wind was favourable. The journey back had to wait until the wind had turned. If the wind dropped as they sailed, they stopped and waited – for as long as it took. If the wind changed and took you off course, well, you arrived wherever you arrived. If the wind became too strong and turbulent, you might never arrive at all.

Praying to God for a favourable wind was a routine part of religious life. For generations, sailors put themselves into the hands of a power they could not control, knowing that there was no other way to get where they wanted to go.

Of course, you didn't have to be a sailor to appreciate the power of wind. The remains of sturdy windmills still dot our landscapes. Here and there you can still find a working one, and see how, before industrialisation, wind power was harnessed to grind the flour to bake our bread. You don't need to go far, there's a good one at Cromer, just beyond Walkern. But here again, you could only use the mill if the wind was blowing. If it wasn't, no corn could be ground, and you sat and waited.

Times changed and we discovered power sources which we could control. Coal and steam, and later gas and electricity; power

sources it seemed that we could turn on whenever we wanted. The modern world needed to be in control of its power supplies.

But what's happening now? Windmills are back again. Not grinding corn, but generating electricity. We have realised that the burning of coal, oil and gas has all sorts of side effects that are beyond our control, and that the supply of them is not as limitless as we thought. Wind power, for all its unpredictability, is an important part of energy policy. Perhaps once again we should be praying for favourable winds. The wind didn't go away – we just stopped using it.

The Wind, or Spirit of God doesn't go away either. He has always been there. The beginning of Genesis speaks of Him blowing over the primordial chaos. But like the natural wind, He blows where He will, when He will, not when we tell Him to. He is not under our control.

Perhaps the dramatic events of that first Pentecost after the Resurrection, and the breathtaking, miraculous and often dangerous tale of the life of the early Church make us a little nervous when we think of the Holy Spirit. We fear the kind of transformation in our lives that seems more like a hurricane or a tornado. Perhaps many people do need a hurricane through their lives, blowing down the rickety structures behind which they hide from their God. 'Charismatic' denominations (Pentecostals, Assemblies of God etc) and 'Spirit filled' groups in mainstream congregations emphasise this need. But that is not the whole story.

As surely as every living man and woman has God's breath within them, the Holy Spirit is around and about them. We all need to have the courage to harness that energy, and not just as a last resort, a resource we forget about until we realise that everything else is running out. We may believe, as individuals, or as a society, that we have enough resources of our own to keep us moving, but we are wrong, and one day we will notice.

So, to go back to the seafaring imagery, we need to unfurl our sails, and let the Holy Spirit fill them. Not in the expectation that God will send a new Day of Pentecost upon us – though He might do, you never know – but rather trusting that He will give us a fair breeze to take us wherever each day needs us to go, give us calm when we need to rest, and now and again a bit of a gale to give us a good start on the more challenging tasks we face in life.

Like sailors of old, let us trust ourselves to a power we cannot control, knowing that only the Holy Spirit's power can safely take us where we really need to go.

St Alban – 22nd June

Alban should be the patron saint of anyone who impulsively offers to help a stranger in need... and finds their own life turned upside down as a result.

The story goes that Alban was a Roman citizen quietly living in England in the third century. Then, miles away in Rome, the emperor, Diocletian ordered a persecution of the Christians. Nothing to do with Alban... except that suddenly he found a desperate priest on his doorstep, being hunted down by local soldiers. Alban decided to give the priest shelter, and within days was converted to Christianity himself, and then baptised.

As if this was not brave enough, when the soldiers arrived, Alban decided to take the priest's place. He dressed up in the priest's clothes to enable the priest to escape. Not surprisingly, the soldiers then arrested Alban himself. Now a Christian, Alban refused to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods, and so was condemned to death.

But the story doesn't end there, for Alban went to his execution with such holiness and serenity that one of the executioners was converted, and the other executioner's eyes fell out (or so the story goes). Alban was buried nearby, and the shrine built to his memory was soon known for its healing powers.