

Reflections and Prayers: Pentecost 2020

This is the 9th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

Pentecost 2020

Personal reactions to the present lockdown vary widely (as we will explore more thoroughly in a couple of weeks' time): suffice to say that some fear and are discomfited by it, whilst others can find it a time of blessing, as Elizabeth Cresswell reflects below. The celebrations of Pentecost 2020 may be muted because we cannot be altogether in one place, and we recall the contrasting Holy Spirit images of light, fire, dove and wind (explored by Tom Stuckey, below) in Andrew Reed's hymn (H&P 327, R&S 303) which begins 'Spirit divine, attend our prayers'.

In the middle chapters (14-16) of John's gospel, Jesus intimates that this eternal, enabling presence will come and be with us: though later translations of the New Testament have the Holy Spirit as counsellor, advocate, helper, someone to stand by you, surely, at this time, the word Comforter, as in the Authorised Version and the Living Bible, is most apt (even if it is not, strictly, the most accurate meaning of the original Greek word).

The ancient hymn of Bianco de Siena (StF 372, R&S 294) earnestly prays 'O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear', and of Charles Wesley's many hymns for Pentecost we have 'The Holy Ghost, if I depart, the Comforter will surely come' (H&P 307) and 'O that the Comforter would come, nor visit as a transient guest, but fix in me his constant home, and take possession of my breast' (H&P 291). At this time of crisis, uncertainty and anxiety, is it not the Comforter above all else that we seek?

John Bell, May 2020

So, to the narrative of the day of Pentecost, but as if it is happening right now.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles



When the day of Pentecost had come, they were mostly together in one place, but four cubits apart. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were not supposed to be sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed (but socially distanced) and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, not unduly exhaling, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven (who had settled before the lockdown), though some had since fled to their native lands. And at this sound, what remained of the multitude came together (well, four cubits apart), and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying 'and are not all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language, and a few we don't understand?' For, by then, the Parthians and Arabians had been repatriated.

And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean? Did God bargain for this pandemic? Why now? What sort of a 'new normal' is this?' But others mocking said, 'They are filled with new wine', then, after a short pause, 'yet they can't be, for the bars have been closed for eight weeks'.

But Peter, standing with the eight (for three had succumbed), lifted up his voice and addressed them, quoting Joel's prophecy about the Spirit being poured on all flesh, young men seeing visions, old men (those under 70 and without underlying health conditions) dreaming dreams and God showing signs on the earth beneath. Oh yes? Are these the signs that God had in mind?

And as the new Jerusalem Nightingale Hospital opened its doors to coronavirus patients, Peter continued, 'And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Acts 2: 1-21, RSV, slightly adapted by John Bell, May 2020

A cubit measures about 18 inches, or nearly half a metre.



Hang on Peter, can you unpack that? What does this Pentecost really mean?

Breathing and Infection

Should we be wearing face masks to protect ourselves and others from Covid-19? This question has made all of us aware, probably as never before, of the link between breathing and infection. John in his Gospel tells us that the risen Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. Did Jesus stand and blow all over them - a sort of human air-conditioner? I think not. It was much more intimate. No social distancing here. Jesus went round personally, his face only inches away as he gently breathed on each disciple in turn. It was a kiss of life.

The Greek word for wind is *pneuma*. All cyclists are familiar with the word as we have to regularly pump up the pneumatic tyres on our bicycles. The same word can also be translated 'breath' or 'spirit'. Jesus refers to the mysterious wind when he tells Nicodemus that he must be born again of water and the Spirit.

Jesus breathed on his disciples and infected them with his life. On the day of Pentecost that hidden infection broke out becoming public as God the Father in a hurricane of wind and fire blows upon the twelve, the women and the mother of Jesus. Thus, the Church began as the contagion of Spirit was broadcast by word of mouth to the assembled crowds. Unlike Covid-19 we do know where this breath comes from because this is God's Holy Spirit of life and love.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Till I am wholly thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with thy fire divine.

Revd Tom Stuckey, former President of the Conference and Chair of the Southampton District, May 2020
Hymn StF 370, R&S 295, verse 3, Edwin Hatch

Words from Whittier

Some comforting words from John Greenleaf Whittier (StF 495, R&S 492, verses 5 and 6) as we reflect that perhaps our lives are more ordered, at least for a while, as we listen to God's voice at Pentecost 2020:

Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire; speak through the earthquake, wind and fire, O still small voice of calm!

Be silent

I consider lockdown a gift. Time away from the busyness of life. Time to think, to reflect, to enjoy God's wonderful creation, to BE. Time also to pray.

Yet I wonder if our praying is as 'busy' as it always was. There is so much to pray about. We have a list of people to pray for, situations to put before God, a cycle of prayer we are following, a liturgy to follow. All good. But maybe there is something more

Years ago, when I went on my '5 years in the ministry' retreat, we were given the following and I found it enormously helpful. In all the uncertainties, feelings of disconnection and loneliness we may feel in lockdown, I hope you will find it helpful too.

Be silent.

Be still.

***Alone. Empty
before your God.***

Say nothing.

Ask nothing.

Be silent.

Be still.

***Let your God
look upon you.***

That is all.

God knows.

God understands.

***God loves you with
an enormous love.***

***God wants only to
look upon you
with love.***

Quiet.

Still.

Be.



***Let your God -
Love you.....***

Revd Elizabeth Cresswell, May 2020. Some Norley readers may remember that Elizabeth and her husband, the Revd Roger Cresswell, preached at Norley in June 2007 and May 2009.

Photo by Joan Bell, a quiet pond off Norley Road, Cuddington, April 2020

Note to readers

I have gathered these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymn book (Singing the Faith – StF or Hymns and Psalms – H&P) and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.