

Sermon, Pentecost 2021

Introduction: So here we are on the Day of Pentecost, a very high and special feast day in the yearly liturgical cycle. And as you all surely know, this day has almost forever now in British Christianity also been called Whitsunday. In that ancient collection of Edwardian and Elizabethan sermons (called homilies) referenced in Article 35 of our Articles of Religion, the homily authorized for this particular day is called,

An Homilie Concerning the Comming Downe of the holy Ghost, and the manifold gifts of the same, for Whitsunday.

But as our eyes are almost bombarded with all the beautiful liturgical red which we are seeing this morning, we might well wonder about the appropriateness of calling this day **Whit**sunday. One explanation which would remove the apparent confusion is to understand the Whit of Whitsunday as being the ancient word for wisdom, or wit or knowledge. So, for example, the Augustinian canon John Mirk (1382-1414) offered this explanation,

“Good men and women, as we knowen well all, this day is called Whitsonday, for because that the Holy Gost has this day brought wyt and wysdome unto all Christ’s disciples.”

That would resolve the matter nicely. If only it were so! But well-informed modern opinion on the question is almost unanimous now in thinking that on this point Canon Mirk got it wrong. How do they know? Well, the ancient word wyt which means wisdom or knowledge is never spelled with an “h” after the “w” and the ancient spelling of Whitsunday is always spelled with an “h” after the “w” and never without it.

Thus the Whit of Whitsunday has nothing whatsoever to do with ancient word wyt which means wisdom. But as we would have guessed, Whit is a very common shortened form of the word “White.” Whitsunday surely means “WhiteSunday, but why would it be called that?

The dominant view and the one which seems almost certainly right to me is that the white of Whitsunday refers to the white robes of those who would be baptized on this day. The white robes of those baptized were a powerful ancient symbol for the spiritual washing of regeneration and the perfect righteousness of Christ which those who believed in him had put on in becoming by faith the forgiven and justified children of God. Baptism is front and center in our consideration of this special day. So in the very chapter of Acts we are considering today, chapter 2, at the end of Peter’s sermon we hear this,

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

On that first Pentecost and on every Pentecost since that time, this day has been a day judged highly suitable for the baptism of new believers. So in hearing the ancient term Whitsunday we are to be picturing in our mind’s eye over the generations the countless thousands, indeed millions of those who have embraced the gospel of Christ, and dressed in their baptismal finery have received the sacrament of baptism and been gathered into that grand company of saints, the Body of Christ, the church.

****Now since we have raised the issue of baptism, permit me to interject a bit of theological caution here.**** As Prayerbook Anglicans we do understand that it is not the external rite with water which washes one clean from one’s sins but the spiritual washing of regeneration of which the baptism in water is an emblem. Perhaps Paul’s statement in Titus 3 is the clearest on the point —

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Or again Peter could hardly have made the distinction between the external rite and the spiritual grace clearer in I Peter 3 — **“Baptism, which corresponds to this (the flood waters in the days of Noah), now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”**

Clear-headed Anglicans have never hesitated to repudiate any language or implication of baptismal regeneration which pretends that there is saving or regenerative power in the water or in the external rite itself. Certainly not!

But Pentecost originally and historically over the years has always been about that ingathering of souls which God accomplished on that day and continues in His mercy to accomplish in the present. And this imagery of an ingathering of souls accords well with the ancient Jewish understanding of Pentecost being an ingathering of the harvest, the feast of weeks, seven weeks, to be precise, celebrating the early harvest and anticipating the late harvest.

Just as one commentator states,

“Pentecost, the Feast of the Firstfruits, was a most appropriate time for the Spirit to come. It was closely connected with Passover, just as the Spirit’s coming would be associated with the saving events of the Lord’s crucifixion and exaltation. The feast celebrated the first produce of the Promised Land, Israel’s inheritance, just as the Spirit is the “firstfruits” of the salvation blessings to the believer.”

The term Pentecost derives from the Greek word meaning fifty. For Pentecost was the day after the seven weeks following Passover.

But if there was ever any uncertainty regarding the white of Whitsunday, surely there should be none regarding the appropriateness of the liturgical red we see everywhere. The language of John the Baptist frames the matter perfectly,

“I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Certainly the red speaks vividly to that fire of the Lord’s baptism, that divine fire which fell upon the disciples on this day in the form of tongues of fire.

But so much for the terms and their history. And perhaps we have said quite enough about the colors, white and red. But what is it all really about? What does it mean?

I think a very helpful way to look at Pentecost or Whitsunday is to look at it as that fire from heaven, that divine provision of the Holy Spirit by which the Lord answered the pressing existential needs and anxieties expressed by the disciples with respect to his Ascension. After all, as they had watched him rise up into the sky and finally out of their sight, they must have been greatly struck by a feeling of bewildering loss. The Lord had left. He was gone. They had been with him, physically, for several years. And then they had watched him depart. What were they to do now? Well, Jesus had anticipated their bewilderment regarding his ascension and had spoken to them at length about it in that great section of John's gospel which is called the Upper Room Discourse found in John 13-17.

Today makes the fourth Sunday in a row in which our gospel lesson has come from that famous discourse, also sometimes called the Farewell Discourse. It seems we are being invited to understand this day, Pentecost, and its meanings in terms of that discourse in general and with respect to the Ascension in particular. And a handy way to be reminded of the stated or implied concerns of the disciples about Jesus' departure is to hear again carefully last week's collect which draws them together succinctly and memorably. Last week we prayed in our service,

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Are our desperate needs as stated in this post-ascension prayer met and fully satisfied by the miracle of Pentecost? This is the question of the day. And the answer, I believe is, yes they are, and magnificently. But how so?

At the heart of that collect are three requests reflecting three needs —

1 Do not leave us comfortless, 2 but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and 3 exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before. Let us consider these three requests, these three needs, and how they are miraculously satisfied in the miracle of Pentecost.

I. *“Do not leave us comfortless.”* The followers of Jesus could not bear the thought of being abandoned by the Lord, of being left alone and vulnerable without the joy, comfort and the protection of his divine presence in their midst.

The language of not being left “comfortless” strikes us as a bit peculiar and unexpected. That’s because the adjective “comfortless” is a word we rarely hear or use anymore. Have any of you used that word or even seen that word in the past five years? I doubt it.

But it’s also because as moderns we are less familiar with older translations of John which were rendered in just that language. Our gospel text for today is John 14:8-17. The very next verse, John 14:18 in Tyndale’s translation of 1526 read,

I will not leave you comfortlesse: but will come vnto you.

This use of the word “comfortless” in the translation of John 14:18 was followed by the Coverdale translation of 1535, the collects of Cranmer of 1549 and 1552, the Bishop’s Bible of 1568 and then most importantly by the King James Version of 1611. So it’s fair to say that through Tyndale’s influence that approach became deeply rooted in the early English translational and spiritual tradition.

But you will look in vain for any modern translation that sounds at all like that. Nowadays, in our modern translations, we hear something very like that which we confront in the ESV — **“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”**

What’s going on? How are we to understand this text?

Well, the Greek construction being translated here has four words. They are 1 *not*, 2 **I will leave**, 3 **you** and then 4 ὀρφανούς. And that final word is exactly the same word as that found in James 1:27 **Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans (ὀρφανούς) and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.**

Jesus is definitely and clearly stating, albeit metaphorically, that he will not leave his disciples as orphans. What did it mean to be left as orphans? It meant to be left without the normal parental care and protection, which is to say to be left utterly vulnerable.

Illustration: (Personal story) The shockingly unexpected death of a young father in Tyler. Speaking to the children at that huge funeral about God's special care for and protection of orphans and widows. The felt vulnerability of orphans.

Jesus told his disciples that although it was true that he would soon be leaving, it was equally true that the separation would be very temporary, for he would be returning. What he said precisely was **"I am coming to you."** But what does such language mean?

One commentator put it this way,

In one sense, He came to them after His resurrection, but it is doubtful if that is what is meant. In another sense, He came to them in the Person of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

And another concurs and says this,

Jesus refers primarily to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, since the mutual indwelling, “you in me, and I in you” (v. 20), will not await the second coming of Christ. In a world that will give them tribulation (16:33), Jesus’ followers will not be defenseless orphans because He will be with them in their trials through the Spirit of truth.

This is the right understanding of Jesus’ words and they are very encouraging and comforting. For in this oftentimes dangerous and hostile world to know that the Holy Spirit in us has brought the Lord’s presence to us in a new and dynamic way is the needed answer to any imagined separation anxiety or feelings of vulnerability pertaining to the Lord’s having ascending into heaven. He did depart. But he soon and magnificently returned on the day of Pentecost.

II. Secondly, from last week’s collect we remember praying — **but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us.**

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost does not only mediate to us the presence of the risen and ascended Lord, it also brings upon us His divine power.

Twice we read that they were to stay in Jerusalem and wait on that divine rain of power from heaven.

So in Luke 24:49 — **“And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”**

The word rendered there “stay” in “stay in the city” is a verb which typically means to sit. I think there is the subtle nuance of **“just sit tight” until you are clothed with power on high.** It’s as though the Lord was cautioning them not to set out on their mission of world evangelism before receiving this power.

Again in Acts 1 we read, **“And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”** and then again a few verses later, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

Jesus was not saying that the power which would rain from heaven upon them would be merely somehow helpful or merely somehow beneficial; no, he was saying it would be absolutely indispensable. They were not even to make a start at their mission of world evangelism until that power had come. For there would be no possibility whatsoever of fulfilling their divine commission apart from the divine enabling. And that enabling came through the Holy Spirit.

The disciples knew precisely what they were to do even before they were given the divine enablement to do it. And that might have represented a temptation to jump the gun. But they wisely waited.

Elaboration: God's people have not always been that wise. Consider the difference in experience between Joshua 6 and Joshua 7. Chapter 6 is the miraculous conquest of Jericho by the Israelites.. God was with them. The walls fell down. Taking that great and fortified city was a cake-walk. Next chapter, next challenge was the smaller and less fortified town of Ai. But God was not with them and the Israelites were put to shameful flight before their enemies. The strength of God's people to accomplish God's purpose is always and in every instance tied to the certainty of God's presence and empowerment. If ever we forget that, failure and shameful disgrace are certain.

The people of God cannot accomplish the purposes of God except by the power of God conferred by His Spirit. After all, the struggle in which we are engaged is a spiritual struggle against spiritual forces of darkness. As Paul states in Ephesians 6,

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

To imagine that we could ever go up against these powers with our own meagre resources would be insane, entirely delusional. The power of God which we so desperately need is the power of God which has been given to us at Pentecost — the Holy Spirit of God. We must learn evermore to live by that power.

III. Thirdly and lastly, we prayed last week that we might be exalted to the very place from where the Lord reigns. Let's remember the entirety of the prayer before exploring this third request. Last week's collect, once again, was this,

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

This longing is related to but not identical to the first of not being left as orphans. We do not wish to be parted from the presence of the Lord we love and follow. We need him near us. So in Pentecost He comes to us in a powerful and transformative way. **I will not leave you as orphans but will come to you.** And he does this in the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. But also, we do not wish to be cut off from or detached from the heavenly glories of his reign from his exalted place at the right hand of the Father.

And Pentecost promises that indeed we are not detached from that glorious reign, but intimately associated with Him and indeed in some measure privy to that divine glory even now. At the tail end of the Upper Room Discourse Jesus prays to the Father in these words,

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24)

Now virtually every commentator I looked at suggests that this is referring to the future glories which believers will experience after our death or after the Second Coming. To be sure, we will experience unimaginable glories at that time. But I think there is considerable Biblical evidence that Jesus had in mind what his followers might experience in this life once the Holy Spirit fell upon them. Or to put it another way, it seems that some of the teaching about the Holy Spirit in the NT suggests that that divine gift gives us an actual foretaste of the kingdom's future glories now.

Consider four lines of evidence.

1) Last Sunday, the Sunday after the Ascension our Psalm was Psalm 68. We recited responsively these words,

The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary. You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.

In the Psalm when the Divine One takes his seat he receives tribute from his human subjects. But notice how the Apostle Paul cites this text but slightly alters it in Ephesians 4 when speaking about Jesus' Ascension,

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says,

**“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”**

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.

Jesus' fulfillment of this language of ascent in Psalm 68 is so overflowing with grace and mercy that rather than to receive tribute or gifts from his subjects he is pouring out his gifts upon them. That language strongly suggest that the risen Lord has opened up the storehouses of his kingdom treasures and graciously poured them out upon us in the giving of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. So our experience of those heavenly gifts is a participation in the Kingly Rule of the Ascended Lord.

2) Consider what is said about the spiritual experience of believers in Hebrews 6. We are described as those who,

have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,

Plainly, the powers of the age to come are not merely future to us but actually operative now in our present experience in this world.

3) Or consider what Peter is saying in Acts 2 about the meaning of what has occurred in this miracle of their speaking in tongues. He plainly states that the prophecy of Joel is fulfilled in Pentecost.

But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

**“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on 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 on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.
And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be
saved.’**

Joel spoke of that great outpouring of the Spirit which would fall upon all flesh at the Great Day of the Lord. Peter says that is now (at least partially) fulfilled in Pentecost.

4) And then fourthly, consider what is said about the Spirit’s function of serving as a pledge or downpayment of the future glories of the kingdom to believers. So in Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul says,

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

or again in I Corinthians 2,

**But, as it is written,
“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.**

It seems quite clear that the miracle of Pentecost draws the disciples of Christ into a partial fulfillment, a partial experience of the future glories of his reign. So we are encouraged to see ourselves in terms of those glories even now, as the Spirit continues to disclose the Kingly purposes of the Ascended Lord in our midst throughout the world.

And this experience of those glories through that divine Spirit should entirely recalibrate our thinking about who we really are, and where we really are. As Paul states in Colossians 3,

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Conclusion: In sum, Pentecost was initially a Jewish feast of ingathering. But it was given new and much weightier significance when the Holy Spirit of God on that day fell upon the followers of Jesus. As the juxtaposition of Acts 2 with our OT lesson from Genesis is meant to imply, we might well see this miracle as a reversal of Babel. True enough. Whereas a rebellious humanity which aspired to storm heaven was confused and divided by the diversity of human languages, now the division of humanity is overcome by the miraculous gift of the Spirit and the accompanying gift of tongues. And as Peter states in his sermon following the miraculous rain of fire, it is also a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy about the great Day of the Lord. The Spirit of God has fallen in a new and transformative way upon all flesh, no longer just upon prophets or kings. And as the resolution of those concerns and anxieties held by the disciples regarding the Lord's physical departure from the earth and their actual midst in his ascension, it is in every way the basis of their and our ongoing courage and confidence to live triumphantly as ambassadors of the ascended king in the here and now.

The One who departed has returned in the Coming of the Spirit. He is in our midst in a way which takes away any notion of our being abandoned and vulnerable orphans. We are not that for He has come to us and into us on Pentecost.

And the very power of God has fallen upon us in the Coming of this fiery gift. We are not left to operate from the limited and meagre resources of our humanity. We have the gift of divine power by which power we are encouraged to live and fulfill our great mission. And through this rain from heaven the glories of the kingdom of the Ascended Lord are now in some measure experienced by us and operative within us. The gifts which he has poured out upon us are gifts from the treasure store of his divine kingdom. The glories which the Spirit discloses to us even now are foretastes of coming glories beyond imagining. We have not merely been shown but have even been allowed to experience realities which are in some measure yet future. We must now see our place in this world and within God's eternal purposes differently. The Spirit of God within us is our downpayment, God's pledge to us, indeed, our foretaste of that which will one day be complete, absolute, the glories of the reign of the Divine Son. He has indeed come to us in Pentecost, and He will one day again come to us at the Second Coming. During the interim we are to live our lives by the power he poured forth from heaven on this day. **Amen.**