

Pentecost 2021 sermon

I'm sure many of you will remember the storm of 1987. I know it caused great damage in the south east, including some loss of life:

SUSSEX: Shoreham experienced the strongest gusts in the UK, of 100 knots (115 mph)

SURREY: Judith was living near Redhill at the time. Slept right through it. Drove to school to do a day's teaching. Got to the school. 3 massive trees across the drive. And the Head said "what are you doing here ? Don't you know there's been a storm ?"

Famously, the weather forecaster Michael Fish told everyone not to worry, that rumours of an approaching hurricane were wrong. But in fairness to him, it was the Met Office data that was inaccurate. Prediction of wind speed and direction has improved since then, but it's still a far from exact science.

I read this week that managing the national grid is much more complicated now because of the increased use of wind energy. Winds will suddenly drop, or there will be strong gusts without any warning, each leading to sudden drops or surges in the amount of electricity in the grid. Wind is never totally predictable.

The sound of a violent wind on the day of Pentecost must have been very unnerving: it was a sound of power, but also of unpredictability.

Given the extraordinary drama of that day, some Christians can make the mistake of concluding that our Christian lives today should be one continuous day of Pentecost, a string of amazing experiences of the senses, and church numbers doubling every week. And that any failure to live up to that intensity is a weakness of our faith. After all, the Holy Spirit hasn't changed, so it must be our fault.

But in our hearts, we know that can't be quite right, because wind is unpredictable. Jesus said the Holy Spirit is like the wind – you can hear it and see its effects, but you can't control it or even always predict what the wind will do. So the Holy Spirit can be powerfully working, without necessarily having the drama and excitement of that first Pentecost.

Now, I don't think many of us here would make that mistake, but there's an opposite mistake, which we're probably far more likely to slide into in a place like Holmbury in the 21st century.

Let's go back and think of the first Pentecost again:

The days and weeks following the resurrection had been a time of real rebuilding for the little band of disciples: they all now believed that Jesus was indeed risen. In that period, Thomas' doubts had been completely dispelled; Peter's haunting sense of failure at having let Jesus down on Good Friday had been healed, if I can use that word; furthermore, the gap left in the apostles' band by Judas had been filled during that post-resurrection time, so their numbers were back to full strength. And Peter was commissioned as leader. In other words, everything was in place for the grand launch, as it were, and Jesus' simple final

command was NOT 'okay, we're ready', but 'do nothing, go back and wait for the Holy Spirit.' Implication: humanly speaking, you might think you're in good shape now, but without the Holy Spirit, you're not going to be of really lasting value.

The mistake for us to avoid is that of thinking that God's Spirit works exclusively through human effort, skill, personality and organisation - however much they may be talents God made us with.

You'll either think I'm being overly flattering or must have lived in rather deprived regions before, but I genuinely am constantly amazed and delighted with the levels of skills that are present in this village and church. But, always bear in mind Jesus' final speech: 'wait. Do nothing until the Holy Spirit comes'. We still need the Holy Spirit to infuse our efforts with His full presence. This plan to galvanise some local support for the horrendous suffering in India right now - it's obviously a good thing to do, but let's ask for the Holy Spirit to lead and to inspire people to give.

One final point to make: my first car was a 20 year old Hillman Super Minx. My parents had given me £700 to buy my first car, and were a little surprised when I chose this car, for a grand total of £145. I loved the eccentricities of that sturdy car. And one of its many foibles was that wherever I parked, there was always a little blob of oil on the ground afterwards. The tank had a tiny leak, and it needed topping up with oil every 3 months or so. Similarly, somebody was once asked if he was filled with the Holy Spirit. His answer was simple: yes, but I also leak. Later on in the New Testament is a command: Be filled with the Spirit. But it's in what is called a continuous tense. 'Go on being filled'. 'Go on being topped up'. Because we're all a bit leaky. Nothing weirdly mystical about being topped up, it is just taking Jesus at his explicit word that when we ask for the Holy Spirit, he is given to us. But without his ongoing motivating, steering, infusing, our efforts will never quite reach their full, God-inspired potential.

Each of our hymns today is actually just that - a prayer to the Holy Spirit to fill us. I didn't choose them but I'm delighted with them. Come down O love divine / Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire / Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew.

On that note, let us pray:

Come down, O love divine, seek Thou this soul of mine, and visit it with thine own ardour glowing. O comforter, draw near, within my heart appear, and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

