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Pentecost Service – Mitchell’s Plain Archdeaconry
31 May 2009

Ps 104:24-36
Ezek 37:1-14
Acts 2:1-21
Jn 15:26-27 and 16:4b-15

Holy God, by the power of your Spirit, take these words and speak through them, take our minds and speak to them; and take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

Today we celebrate the coming of God’s Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost – and we pray for a new outpouring of his Spirit upon all of us who are gathered here.

How should we expect our prayers to be answered?

The collect tells us that the coming of God’s Spirit should affect us in two ways.

First, our hearts will be inspired.

As the reading from the Book of Acts tells us, quoting the prophet Joel – we should expect to ‘see visions and dream dreams’.

God lets us in on his plans for his world – and he shares his enthusiasm with us, setting our hearts ‘on fire with his love and power’!

Secondly, we should expect to be transformed by this vision, by this love, by this power, and ‘sent out as witnesses to the wonder of God’s love’.

The disciples were meeting all together on the day of Pentecost – quite possibly in a locked room, as they did after the crucifixion, because they were afraid.

Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem to be ‘clothed with power from on high’.

And what a difference this made!

What they could never have done on their own, they could now do in the power of the Spirit. They could share the message of God's good news, with confidence and conviction.

What we could never do, and never dare to do, on our own: God wants us to do, in the power of his Spirit.

So, then: the coming of the Spirit brings vision and transformation.

This is what we should expect.

And we should expect it, as is so often the case with the great things of God, 'once for all, again and again, and more and more'.

Once for all, the Spirit came, on the day of Pentecost – almost two thousand years ago.

And, once for all, the Spirit comes upon each of us when we become Christians. In Baptism the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us, and, uniting us with Jesus in his death and resurrection, raises us to new life, as members of the Body of Christ.

And yet, again and again, each year we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, and ask God to send his Spirit upon us once more – to renew the life of faith within us and give us new vision; and to transform and change us to be more like Jesus, as we continue to follow him on the journey to which he calls us.

This does not just happen today. At each new stage in our lives, we can ask for a new and fresh experience of God's empowering.

In particular, this is what we assert at Confirmation – that milestone on the journey of faith: when we affirm our commitment to following Jesus in every aspect of our lives, and so come, as the Prayer Book says, [quote] 'to be filled, through the laying on of hands, with the power of the Spirit for worship, witness and service' [unquote].

We may also ask God for a fresh blessing of his Spirit when we begin a new chapter in our lives, or face a new challenge:

- the start of a new school year, or sitting exams
- on getting a new job, or taking on new responsibilities – or on being retrenched
- on illness or before an operation
- on marriage – even on divorce and the new start we then need

- after bereavement
 - on moving house
- and all manner of other changes in our circumstances.

Or it may be when we take on new responsibilities within church:

- as a member of the council of a pastoral charge,
- as a synod representative,
- as a warden,
- a lay minister,
- joining the fellowship of vocations,
- embarking on theological training,
- being ordained,
- moving to a new parish ...

The list is endless – but God’s promise is always the same. Whenever something new comes along, the best thing to do is to ask for God’s Holy Spirit to guide you by his vision, and to transform and strengthen and equip you with every gift you will need for all that lies ahead.

In the Book of Acts we read how the disciples laid hands on people, such as Paul and Barnabas, with prayers for God’s empowering Spirit to come upon them, to inspire them and equip them for a new task, a new phase in life.

And it is not just that the Holy Spirit comes on us again and again, the Holy Spirit also comes upon us more and more.

Throughout the whole of our lives, God is, by his Spirit at work within us, steadily changing and shaping us to be more like Jesus, more like the people he created us to be.

Sometimes those changes are very gradual, and it is only as we look back that we see how much we have grown in faith.

Sometimes those changes are more sudden – or more clear to us. Perhaps God challenges us

- to change some aspect of our behaviour,
- to give up a bad habit,
- to mend a broken relationship,
- to offer, or accept, forgiveness.
- to put right a wrong
- to take on a new direction.

In all of these, God's Holy Spirit is there to help us have the courage, the strength, to do what he calls us to do.

In the Greek of the New Testament, the word for the Holy Spirit is 'Paraclete', which means 'the One who comes alongside'.

Wherever we are in life, God wants to come alongside us – to help us, to guide us, to encourage us, to strengthen us. If we let him, he'll pick us up when we fall on our faces; and point us in the right direction when we lose our way, and give us the fresh start we need. But he'll never abandon us, even if at times we turn our back on him.

Perhaps I can put it like this: wherever we are in life, the Holy Spirit wants to take us to the next level.

So where in life are you today?

Let us go back to this morning's readings.

Perhaps you feel like those old bones – dried up, lifeless, without hope.

Perhaps you feel like those bodies that have no breath within them – just going through the motions, but not really alive.

Perhaps you feel like those disciples at the Last Supper – unsure of what Jesus is promising for you; hearing his words but not understanding how they will become real in your life.

Or perhaps you feel like those disciples on the day of Pentecost – the Spirit is welling up inside you, and now you are wondering where will God take you next.

Wherever you are, God wants to take you to the next level – to share abundant life with you: through a new vision of his promises and plans; and through change and transformation so you can live his vision to the maximum, filled with his joy and power!

Let me pause for a minute here, so that we can all reflect on this amazing promise.

What might it mean for you, here today, for the Spirit to come on you again, and more, than before?

Let us dare to consider what a new beginning, or the next level, might be for us.

Just close your eyes, and relax, where you are sitting.

Remember how much God loves you. You are his precious and beloved child, in whom he delights.

Now, ask your loving God to bring to your mind some part of your life where he is inviting you to go forward in some new and different way.

[Pause]

Let him show you the place where he wants to bring you a fresh vision. Let him reassure you that he wants to set your heart on fire, so you can handle this fresh start full of his joy.

Let him excite you with his promise that he will transform you, and give you the power to live out this vision, filled with his love.

[Pause]

Now, in the silence of your heart, invite the Holy Spirit to come to you in a new and fresh way, and make these promises real.

[Pause]

And now say thank you, for, even if you feel no different at this precise moment, I am sure you will soon experience the wonderful gifts of the Spirit's presence in whatever God is calling you to do and be.

[Pause]

And now turn, and share a smile with your neighbour.

Smile, because you know God loves each of you, God is with each of you, his Spirit lives inside each of you, and he delights to do more than you can hope or ask or imagine!

[Pause]

Isn't God wonderful!

And there is more!

God has the same message not only for each one of us here today – he has the same message for each of our churches, for this Archdeaconry, and for the Anglican Church in Southern Africa as a whole.

He wants us – together – to dream dreams and see visions; and he wants us – together – to be transformed to share the love of God with joy and power with everyone in our communities.

Do we dare to let him dream his dreams in us, together? Do we dare to let him change us, where we need changing, together?

One of the names of the Holy Spirit is ‘the Comforter’.

Sometimes it is said that while God comforts those in discomfort, in contrast, he makes the comfortable uncomfortable.

If we are a bit too cosy and complacent, a bit too sure that we have things under control, and organised as we want them, then the chances are that God may want to shake us up a bit!

The Anglican Church is a pretty comfortable tradition to belong to! With our history, our traditions, our ways of being church, our fine buildings – we are respected, and respectable!

How does God challenge us, perhaps to be ready to go outside our comfort zones, as he dreams his dreams in us?

And yet, God is Lord of everything, everywhere, and, wherever he leads us, there is *nowhere* that is outside God’s comfort zone!!

Isn’t that an exciting thought!

So, across the Province, we are asking ourselves – what is God’s vision for us, in the twenty-first century?

Now that apartheid is over, and the country is consolidating democracy, and ensuring that the legacies of the past are fully overcome: how are we to be the body of Christ here and now, so that we can all live the flourishing, abundant lives God wants for us?

You can read about how we are developing this vision, in some of the monthly letters I write to all the people of God in the Province. If you haven’t seen them – ask your clergy!

And what about here?

What are his dreams for Mitchell's Plain?

What is his vision for the life of each church, and for all of you together?

My prayer for you all today is that through this service, and in the weeks ahead, you may find the Holy Spirit coming upon you, as parishes, as an archdeaconry in new and fresh ways.

Do not just celebrate what God did once for all on the Day of Pentecost; and once for all in your Baptism.

Open your hearts to receive the Holy Spirit once again, and more than ever before.

And may God set your hearts on fire with love, inspired by his vision for the life of your churches and your community.

And may he fill you with his power, his confidence, his conviction, and transform you to as he sends you out as his witnesses to the wonders of his love.

May he bless you beyond your greatest hopes and dreams – and may he make you a blessing to everyone in Mitchell's Plain.

Amen.