

## **Pentecost 2020 (Preached online to the Parishes of the Good Shepherd, the Ascension, St Mary the Virgin and St Michael & All Angels)**

Good morning. I speak to you today on this glorious Pentecost Sunday as we gather to celebrate our faith and share in the Renewal of our Baptism Vows and in Spiritual Communion. I regret very much that we are unable to be together in person and I ask everyone to hold firm until all the familiar and much-loved activities of church life resume. I thank everyone from the Parishes of St. Mary the Virgin, the Good Shepherd, the Ascension and St. Michael & All Angels for your continued faithfulness during this very strange time. Your parishes have risen to the challenge of offering worship online every week and I know that pastoral care continues. On this Sunday we continue to pray for everyone affected in any way by Covid-19.

Today we celebrate Pentecost -- a word which means "fifty days" for that is how many days have elapsed since Easter. On this day the Holy Spirit came like a mighty wind among the early followers of Jesus, transforming them forever with its power and filling them with the strength and courage to carry the message of Jesus to a world that was not only indifferent, but sometimes downright hostile. The Day of Pentecost has often been called the "Birthday of the Church" for it was on that day a ragged and uncertain collection of believers were brought together by the Spirit of God to become the very Body of Christ in the world. Pentecost made one body out of many diverse people, binding them together in unity of spirit. Just listen to the description of the event from the Book of Acts (2:1-21):

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

And the Holy Spirit has been part of the church ever since.

There is sometimes great misunderstanding within the Christian Church about what it is that the Holy Spirit really does. There are some who seem to feel that the main role of the Spirit is to add excitement and dramatic flourishes to worship and unless worship is filled with motion and commotion, then the Spirit must surely be absent. A few even apply the term, "charismatic" to this type of manifestation and judge other congregations and churches by a very narrow understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit. What they sometimes fail to understand is that, while dramatic and emotional experiences sometimes do accompany the presence of the Holy Spirit within a church, that is not the primary role of the Holy Spirit at all. The primary role of the Holy Spirit is to build up all of God's people in unity so that each person's gift complements the gift of another.

St. Paul wrote of what it means for someone to receive the Holy Spirit and its gifts in his letter to the Galatians and this is what he writes: ... *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* Here Paul seems to be saying that the Spirit when it comes will bear a particular kind of fruit, the qualities of which are *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. Like seeds planted in a garden, the Holy Spirit, when it takes root in a person's life and matures, will eventually grow into something much greater and much more beautiful than mere seeds. Paul is saying that these are the qualities one shows when they attain maturity in that Spirit.

But in order for us to grow and mature the Spirit has to work in us, rearranging some things in our lives so that we conform more closely to the life of Christ. And that can be both painful and difficult for Christians because when the Spirit comes, things will change ... in our personal lives and in the life of our church.

And so, after all of that, we come to Dr. Seuss, or more specifically, *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss. Some of you are wondering how Dr. Seuss relates to the Holy Spirit and he doesn't ... directly ... but *The Cat in the Hat* sure does.

You know the story, don't you? How the cat comes to a home one day, and after gaining admission, proceeds to rearrange and reorder everything from top to bottom. At one point the cat even brings in a box containing Thing One and Thing Two and they help the cat in his work of changing the familiar all around. The children of the household are amazed if not unsettled by all of the activity, but it is the fish in the bowl that is most upset. In fact, the fish is angry about what he sees happening and proceeds to tell the cat in no uncertain terms that he is really going to be in trouble for this:

"Don't do that," he says.

"Stop!"

"Put it back the way it was."

"That's not allowed."

"I'm telling."

But it's all to no avail because the cat doesn't listen to the fish at all but seems to march to the beat of his own drum as he moves furniture around and rearranges everything so that nothing quite looks the same again.

-How often in the church are we like that fish when the Holy Spirit comes like the Cat in the Hat and says I'm going to do a new thing here?

-How often have we failed to see the activity of the Holy Spirit and wanted only to put things back the way they were?

If we are truly faithful to God and his Spirit, we must recognize that the Church is sometimes like a house in need of a makeover in order to become what it needs to be in the service of God.

Just as a garden in order to grow as it should needs tending to and nurturing by a gardener, our lives and our church also need tending to and nurturing by God's Spirit.

Growing spiritually is vitally important to the Christian life. Sometimes in ministry I have encountered persons who are stuck in their spiritual journey and unable to progress further. Sometimes I have even encountered members of the church who dismiss the gifts of the Holy Spirit as unnecessary – Those gifts of *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* and the changes they bring.

You see, the easiest thing for a church to do is to keep things just like they always were. The hardest thing to do is to change. And perhaps the most difficult thing of all for some is to see the Holy Spirit at work when that happens. You know the 7 last words of a dying church, don't you? We never did it like that before.

We, of course, know all about painful change in recent days. Covid-19 has robbed us of so much and reordered our spiritual lives in profound ways. There has been loss, but there has also been gain. The Parishes of St. Mary the Virgin, the Ascension, the Good Shepherd, and St Michael & All Angels were already on a particular path together when this great change struck like the Cat in the Hat reordering everything. But the Holy Spirit also came, rearranging your lives of faith. You are now leading our diocese in what you are doing together. Your sharing and mutual support has been life-giving in the midst of so much desolation.

At the end of *The Cat in the Hat* the cat puts everything back the way it was. Everything is picked up and the house is restored to what it used to be. And that's where this comparison with Dr. Seuss ends. Because I don't want you to pick things up and put them back the way they were after this is over. Instead, please continue in the good new things you are now doing together as you live and serve and grow in the Holy Spirit. You have already discovered a new way of being the church in the world. May that new way continue long after these days of Covid-19.

Most importantly, may you strive to be faithful to God in all things and to seek the gifts of his spirit in all you say and do – Those gifts of *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*

And may God bless you along the way. Amen.