I think it was the great Dr. Samuel Johnson who once said “Enthusiasm, Sir, is a very terrible thing! A very terrible thing!” He was referring to the C18th suspicion of the enthusiasm and spontaneity of Methodist spirituality, private revelation, anything that cut religion loose from its rational basis. That made it an affair of the heart rather than the head.

The word enthusiasm comes from the Greek enthousiasmos, and literally means “the power of God within”, being inspired or possessed by God.

Enthusiasm, in that original sense, is what we celebrate today – the coming of the Spirit of God upon and into those first disciples at Pentecost. Before it came they were a demoralised bunch of followers who had met the risen Jesus and had received his authority to forgive sins and preach the Gospel, but were stuck indoors. There was something missing; the power, confidence, enthusiasm to do it. Then without warning it came – fire from above, burning in their hearts, that indescribable something that made the Gospel message come alive. The Holy Spirit. They didn’t ask for it, and they couldn’t control it. Suddenly there it was and out they went into the world, on fire with love and enthusiasm, and able to do great things.

Their primary focus was not an intellectual belief about God but rather an overwhelming sense of the presence and action of the Spirit in their own lives and the lives of people of their own time. They expected miracles, they expected gifts of healing, they believed God guided their daily lives through prophesy and its interpretation. And Luke in Acts 2 gives us a compelling picture of the life of this Pentecost community.
Those first Christians lived together, owned everything in common, sold their goods and shared out the proceeds according to need. They met in each other’s houses for the breaking of bread, shared gladly and generously, they gave praise to God, and God added to their number day by day. It is an attractive picture of a dynamic community, living by the Spirit of Jesus, charismatic, living in the moment, free flowing.

But equally interesting is how quickly this charismatic church gave way to the institutional church we recognise in our own churches today. Even by the time the first three Gospels were written down, probably in the last 20 years of the 1st Century, we can see emerging a greater sense of the institutional, ordered church. And by the time the Epistles to Timothy Titus, and the epistles of Peter, John James and Jude were written, we can see reflected in them a much more structured Christian community with an ordained ministry.

And over subsequent centuries that process has continued, punctuated, it’s true, by occasional movements of ‘enthusiasm’ like the Franciscans in the thirteenth century, or the Methodist movement in the C18th. But overall, over the centuries, there has been a steady progress towards greater institutionalisation. So that today the established churches we know in the modern world are profoundly – well, establishment. Forces for law and order, for conformity and respectability, for traditional morality and reasonable religion.

Now much of that is good and necessary – we all need structure; and ritual and hierarchy certainly have their place – but, but it is worth reminding ourselves on this Feast Day of the Spirit that the Gospels constantly and amazingly emphasise another picture entirely – the irresponsible, imprudent, joyful, risk-taking, deeply unsensible ministry of Jesus. The man who wanders round Galilee with no visible means of support (except the women who follow him) who calls on his followers to take no thought for the morrow; who consorts with the riff-raff and outcasts of his time, who shows exorbitant generosity (think of the wedding at Cana and the anointing with a costly jar of ointment.) A man, who consistently sides with the poor and marginalised, who values freedom over control, impulse over reflection, desire over restraint, paradox over reason, and joy over rules and regulations and work. An extraordinary picture.

How do we capture and channel something of that spirit of freedom and love and openness within our churches and our lives today? We constantly need to ask ourselves whether we have replaced the joyful, unstructured open ministry of Jesus and the zeal...
and enthusiasm of that first Christian community by institutional structures, commissions, synods, and committees, and unwittingly tried to tame the Holy Spirit so that it becomes something the Church controls and dispenses in carefully controlled doses – a little when you’re baptised, a little more when you are confirmed, a little more when you receive the sacraments.

But Jesus and his Spirit isn’t a package we can hand out to the chosen few, but rather a personal reality to which the church can point people, but over which she has no control. The Spirit of God blows where it wills.

The funny, frustrating thing about confidence and enthusiasm in every aspect of life is that you can’t control it. You can’t summon it when you want it. You can’t keep it when you’ve got it. In the same way you can’t control the Holy Spirit. He’s never been noted for his obedience to Synods or Popes, because the Spirit dances to God’s tune, not ours.

Christian history has seen a constant oscillation between the charismatic and the institutional in the life of the Church: between enthusiasm and control, between conformity and risk-taking, between reason and emotion.

Perhaps the Feast of Pentecost is our yearly reminder to open up ourselves, both institutionally and personally, to take a walk on the wilder side of the life of faith, open to the Jesus who calls us not to play it safe but to take risks for him, to seek the confidence and enthusiasm that can transform and renew us, to ask God to fill our lives with that mysterious hidden power that can set the church and the world on fire.

Come Holy Spirit, open our hearts, and kindle them with the fire of your love.

AMEN.