9 June 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Day of Pentecost
Acts 2:1–21, Romans 8:14–17, John 14:8–27
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The last time I preached at Pentecost – three years ago and in another cathedral – we had an unexpected piece of excitement.

In that cathedral, Lincoln, we had incense at Pentecost. And at the end of the service, we’d go in procession – servers, choir, clergy, and the whole congregation - all the way down to the font at the far end of the nave, so that our blessing and dismissal would happen at the font: reminding us that the Holy Spirit comes upon us in baptism and confirmation and sends us out on the long walk not only to the far end of church (and in Lincoln it is a long walk: the nave is 482 feet long) but even further, into the world to be the presence of God there.

The blessing we had at the end of the service then is the same one that we’ll have today, culminating in the lovely phrase – picking up, of course, on the imagery of tongues of flame from our Acts reading – “May the Spirit, who set the Church on fire upon the day of Pentecost, bring the world alive with the love of the risen Christ.”

At least, that was the plan.

You remember we had incense?

Well, nobody had remembered to turn off the fire alarms at the far end of the nave.

The president said “May the Spirit, who set the Church on fire” – and right on cue, the fire alarm went off.

It was very, very funny.

We will hear the same phrase at the end of our service today – though hopefully without any unexpected fire alarms to accompany it. That imagery of fire and flame is woven all through our service: through its texts and readings, through the flame colour that we wear, through the hymns and the anthem. It reminds us through all our senses that the Holy Spirit came upon Peter and the disciples in a wind from heaven and in tongues of flame; and through all
our senses, it invites us to experience the presence of God, through the Holy Spirit, who comes like fire.

And it’s a particularly clear example of something that always happens when we come together to worship. Our liturgical colours, our liturgical words, our liturgical music and our liturgical actions are always about helping us to experience something of what God is. But the more special the day – the more clearly it is part of the great drama of what God does for us in Jesus – the more the liturgy changes to show us how what we are doing, gathered together, is drawing us into that great drama. When we gather together in worship, God really does something: we are not just remembering something from the past, or even entering imaginatively into the experience the disciples had. We are entering in reality into the sphere of God. We are doing and saying things that are symbolic, knowing that God works through the symbol to create the reality; not just remembering the events of salvation history but making them actively present and choosing to take our own part in the story of God’s work in the world, knowing that the Spirit moves through liturgy – every liturgy – to meet us and heal us, give us a glimpse of God’s glory and send us to serve him in the world.

And if that’s the case with every liturgy, how much more so with the liturgy of the feast of Pentecost: this great feast of the Holy Spirit. This morning more than any other, everything we do speaks of the presence of the Spirit and what it means to be God’s people, living in the power of the Spirit, who came on the first disciples like wind and fire.

We have our visitors from Vaxjo: whose presence echoes the disciples who speak in many tongues to people from every country under heaven. We have kept our normal Eastertide pattern of sprinkling with holy water during the Kyries, and having our confession later in the service: a reminder, like the lit Paschal candle, that Pentecost is still part of the Easter season. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the end of the story that began with the risen Jesus. The Holy Spirit is God with us, to inspire and empower, just as Jesus promised in the Gospels.

And – alongside the differences of text and music – perhaps the most noticeable thing is that we had our first reading much closer to the beginning of the service. That highlighted that this reading is what it’s all about this morning. The Pentecost reading – the disciples, the wind from heaven and tongues of flame, the proclamation of God’s glory and salvation to people from the ends of the earth, the time that God’s promises through the prophets were fulfilled – is the story of this service, the story that shapes our Christian life and shapes this morning’s liturgy. When we hear it near the beginning of the service, we know it’s important; and we are primed to look for echoes of it throughout the liturgy.
It might have felt uncomfortable to have the first reading at the wrong point in the service – even now that you know why. But that, too, is part of the point. The disciples in that reading didn’t find the presence of the Spirit comfortable – far from it. The imagery of gales and fire are not comfortable ones. To go out into the streets and talk to strangers in a language that, until five minutes before, you had never spoken is not a comfortable thing. The Holy Spirit didn’t allow them to stay with what was easy and comfortable - but in the power of the Spirit they had the power to do what was uncomfortable.

Later in the service, the anthem will make the same point. It’s a setting of a translation of the traditional text of the Veni Creator Spiritus, prayed and sung at Pentecost since the ninth century. It starts and ends with the traditional chant for that text. But in the middle: it does something else. It becomes complex, discordant. The choir slide from one note to another. They sing scraps of melody at a different time to those next to them. It is the disciples speaking in tongues; the crackling flame and howling wind of the upper room: the Holy Spirit who is wild and strange, not comfortable or cosy, but in whose mighty power there is complete safety.

So our Pentecost liturgy, words and music are not comfortable or cosy. We use them to reflect the story of Acts; to reflect what the Holy Spirit is like; but also to invite the Holy Spirit to come among us – and when the Spirit comes, it is as wind and as fire.

That’s the real point of that story from Lincoln. It’s not just that God’s comic timing is impeccable. It’s also that the Spirit is entirely about the unexpected. A fire alarm is a perfectly appropriate response to the Spirit: shocking us out of our complacency and into immediate and purposeful action. That’s what the Spirit did for the disciples; that’s what the Spirit does for us; that, I hope, is what parts of this service have done and will do for you.

At the end of the service, Canon Biggar will use the words we have been talking about:

“May the Spirit, who set the Church on fire upon the day of Pentecost, bring the world alive with the love of the risen Christ.”

The Spirit does that – and will continue to do that. And the Spirit does that through you and through me. By setting us on fire with new and wonderful life, and sending us to spread that fire to everyone whom we meet. Imagine if everyone we sat next to on the bus, or at work, or in a café; everyone we queued behind in Waitrose; could see that we were lit up from the inside with the fire of God’s life. Imagine if every time we spoke to one of those people, we sparked that fire inside them as well. Imagine if, when we pray to be set on fire with God’s love, we really mean it.
If that sounds scary, don’t worry. It sounded scary to the disciples too. Yet in the middle of wind and fire, danger and wildness, the Spirit is also God with us. God with us in liturgy and God with us in life. God who blows us out into the wild places and remains with us even there. God who breathes fire into us that we may set the world alight with love.