**Sunday 31st May, 2020: Pentecost, 11am Holy Communion**

**Acts Ch 2 vv 1 – 21 John Ch 7 vv 37 – 39**

What a glorious day this is! After all the trauma, all the loss, all the delight at being reunited with Jesus after his resurrection, and then his parting from them once and for all – 10 days ago at the Ascension – Jesus’ disciples are now filled to bursting with joy, boldness, and power, just as he promised they would be! What a roller-coaster it’s been for them all! And what a relief that the Holy Spirit has shown up so gloriously, so unexpectedly, and with such authority. One of the members of our prayer group on Thursday evening was wondering what the disciples had been praying throughout those ten days, as they huddled together in obedience to Jesus’ final instructions. They were still under suspicion, and could easily have been arrested by the authorities. Yet, wonderfully, they were shielded and protected in their vulnerability, and then blown away by the arrival of the Holy Spirit that Pentecost morning.

Two of the great symbols of survival have always been fire and water. Even today in many countries, without fire, people cannot cook their food or manage to stay warm. And universally, without water, none of us survive more than a few days. We *absolutely* need water to live.

Our brief gospel reading today focuses on a climactic moment in Jesus’ ministry, possibly six months before his death. It happens during the October thanksgiving for the harvest – the feast of Booths. The historian, Josephus, called it, ‘the holiest and the greatest festival among the Jews’. It was the people’s favourite of the three great festivals, and everyone living within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was obliged to come to the city and sleep out in natural bivouacs for eight days, symbolising the time when the Israelites camped in the wilderness, during their journey to the Promised Land. The booths popped up everywhere, and had to be built especially for the purpose – with leafy branches taken from the trees nearby. They had to offer some shelter from the elements, but still allow some sunshine through, with their roofs sufficiently open that they could see the stars at night. Each day the people were to congregate at the Temple, bringing bring choice fruit, leafy boughs, and palm- and willow branches. They held up the greenery to create a sort of temporary screen as they marched around the great altar. Each day, one of the priests would take a golden jug and head down to the Pool of Siloam to collect about a litre of water. It would be carried back in procession through the Water Gate, while the people recited Isaiah Ch 12 v 3, ‘With joy you will draw water from the wells of Salvation’; and then he would pour it over the Temple altar as an offering to the Lord. While he was doing this, the worshippers sang, ‘O give thanks to the Lord’ (Psalm 118 v1) and a special selection of psalms, with the Levite musicians accompanied them on flutes. At the end, the worshippers would give a massive shout and wave their branches in the air. It must have been pretty amazing to be a part of it all. It makes even our charismatic gatherings look rather tame! The whole thing was meant as a glorious means of giving thanks to God: for the wonderful gift of water, for the promise of rain in future, and for the times when water had been provided miraculously for the thirsty Israelites in the Sinai desert, when Moses had struck the rock, in obedience to God. The final day of the festival saw the people marching around the altar seven times, their branches held aloft, finishing with the biggest festal shout of all, bringing to mind the collapse of the walls of Jericho, as God’s people entered the Promised Land of Canaan. It is at the *climax* of this great festival that Jesus cries out in a loud voice, proclaiming, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. As the scripture has said, “out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water”’. In the Greek, it actually records Jesus as saying, “out of the believer’s belly..” Interestingly, the Jews attributed different parts of the body to the thoughts and emotions. The *heart* was understood to be the seat of the intellect – or the mind. The *belly* or the *kidneys* were understood to be the place of the emotions. So, in effect, Jesus is saying, ‘Come to me, all you who know your need of assurance, and let me speak to your innermost fears. And I will replenish your life at its deepest and most intimate level’. It has echoes of the conversation Jesus had had with the lonely woman at a well in Samaria, where, in a conversation about having to go on drawing out water in order to survive, Jesus had said, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water *will* be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that *I* will give them will *never* be thirsty. The water that I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ (John 4: 13,14) The impact of Jesus’ words is that of bringing this woman into a completely new way of life, and setting her on the road to becoming a great evangelist!

As I’m sure we’re aware by now, Jesus always chooses his moments carefully. When he breaks silence to speak publicly, he often does so rather ambiguously – regularly using parables or posing questions, rather than telling it straight. This great pronouncement of Jesus’ at the very end of the Feast of Booths, presumably at the point where the priest is pouring the last water offering on the altar, is one of those rather ambiguous statements. No-one quite knows which scripture Jesus is referring to. He may be hinting at the famous passage in Isaiah Ch 55, which speaks of theheavenly banquet, to which all God’s people are invited. That passage starts like this: “Come, *all* you who are thirsty, *come to the waters*; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” The feast of Booths was deliberately to be a time when *everyone* came together on an equal footing, with the poor, the outcasts and the foreigners welcomed in, alongside those who usually got to worship in the Temple or synagogues.

Jesus declares that *anyone* who is [spiritually] thirsty is free to come to him. They will discover all the blessings of a life lived under the fountain of God’s grace – and receive it all as a free gift, lovingly given. What a wonderful promise that is! No-one is excluded. All of us can come to Jesus, just as we are, and receive this ‘river of refreshing water’ – renewed daily – as it were, bubbling up within us.

This passage has particular resonance for me. I had an extraordinary God-encounter on the Camino – the Way of St James – in north-western Spain, two years ago. I was walking alongside a fine forest in glorious sunshine, up in the hills near Astorga, when I had a strange experience. It was almost as if I could see, in my mind’s eye, water bubbling up from within me, pouring out onto the path, and flowing down the hill behind me – making the plants burst into flower. This verse immediately came to mind, and it felt as though God was saying that he wanted to bless this area of Spain with a new and refreshing outpouring of his Spirit – bringing hope to life in an arid place spiritually.

Almost as though Jesus’ words need explanation, John, in his gospel account, adds a commentary in the next verse. He writes that Jesus was actually referring to the Holy Spirit, whom believers in him had not yet received – because the Holy Spirit had not yet been given. Why? Because Jesus was yet to be glorified: John’s way of explaining Jesus’ death. Jesus chooses to be obedient to the point of death, in order for the victory to be won. Only then, with death defeated, and after his return from the dead, will the Holy Spirit become freely available to all.

And, whilst Jesus, in one of his early meetings with his apostles, after his resurrection, had actually breathed on them with the words, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’, this was a gift to his tiny band of closest followers. But the bigger promise, which Peter quotes from the prophet Joel, was that in the last days God would *pour* out his Spirit upon all peoples, and [their] sons and daughters would prophesy, [their] young people would have visions, and their elderly dream dreams. It was a promise for both men and women; and as God’s Spirit is poured out, they will prophesy. ‘Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’. This is exactly what happened, as the sound of a rushing wind filled the house, and tongues of flame appeared and parted, touching everyone gathered in prayer, willing them with Holy Spirit and bursting joy. They poured out into the Temple precincts and started praising God in languages they’d never learned. And many foreign pilgrims, in the city for the Feast of Pentecost, heard the words of praise in their own languages, and experienced the touch of God in their lives, too. When Peter stood with the Apostles to address the bewildered crowd, he had a new authority, his words weighty with conviction; and by the end of his sermon, three thousand people give their lives to Jesus. They responded to his call to baptism, sealing their new faith experience in Christ. And so, the Church was born!

Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist, had always said that *his* call was to preach repentance from sin, and to cleanse with water; but Jesus, who came after him, would baptize with the *Spirit* *and* with *fire.* Fire burns and refines, while water cleanses and revives. Jesus, in his ministry to us, combines the two. Without the empowering of his Holy Spirit – the Comforter, who draws alongside us at times of need and strengthens us for service – we would be too weak to be any use in the fight against darkness. Without the cleansing and daily reviving of the Water of Life, bubbling up to eternal life, we would die of spiritual thirst. But *with* it, we are refreshed each day and filled to bursting with that infectious joy that draws others to Jesus.

Yesterday’s psalm for the day in Morning Prayer was Psalm 42, that lyrical poem of spiritual longing, which opens with the lines, ‘As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God’. Surely, today, Pentecost Sunday, *that* becomes *our* prayer, too?

Finally, the *responsary* that we’ve been using in Morning Prayer during these last few days between Ascension Day and today, as we’ve been praying, ‘Thy Kingdom Come’, has touched me really deeply. As we remember that great & glorious Feast of Pentecost, it feels particularly appropriate to finish with this beautiful, communal prayer of longing, and to make these words our own:

 Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people,

*All* *and kindle in us the fire of your love.*

 All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

*All* *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people.*

 Renew the face of your creation, Lord, pouring on us the gifts of your Spirit.

*All* *and kindle in us the fire of your love.*

For the creation waits with eager longing for the glorious liberty of the children of God.

*All Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love.*

 **Amen.**