

**‘For everything a season’:
Theology through the church year
Session 10: Pentecost – *Kindle a flame***



The world is charged with the grandeur of God
(Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*)

1. Pentecost

Pentecost ('the fiftieth day') is not a season but a principal feast and the culmination of the Easter season: celebrating the fulfillment of Christ's promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is also known as 'Whitsunday' or 'Whitsun', a contraction of 'White Sunday'. This could be a reference to the white robes of catechumens who were baptized and/or confirmed on Pentecost Sunday. It could also have connections to the old-English 'hwitte', meaning 'wisdom' or 'understanding' (Isaiah 11.12).

Pentecost has its roots in the Jewish festival, *Shavuot*, or the 'festival of weeks', celebrated fifty days after Passover, offering the first fruits of the grain harvest. To celebrate the feast, many Jewish pilgrims of different nationalities and languages would have made their way to Jerusalem, which explains their presence in the biblical story (Acts 2.1-11). This festival also commemorates the giving of the Torah—the 'law' or the 'teachings', and especially the Ten Commandments.

2. Looking backwards: fulfillment of the scriptures

2.1 Old Testament Background

Peter's explanation to the crowd: God's spirit is being poured out on 'all people', just as Hebrew prophets had foretold (Joel 2: 28-32). The Holy Spirit appears as 'wind', like the wind reviving the valley of dry bones (Ezeikel 37: 1-14). The Holy Spirit appears as 'fire', like the fire that appears to Moses (Ex. 3:2), and leads Israel through the desert (Ex. 13: 21). The Holy Spirit appears as 'tongues', like the story of Babel (Gen. 11: 7-9), but in reverse: the different languages are no longer confused and scattered, but intelligible and brought together.

2.2 Gospel promises

The story of Pentecost is also understood in reference to Christ's promise that the disciples would be 'clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24.39). Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the 'spirit of truth', who will be with his followers 'forever' (John 14.16). The promised Spirit is described in a number of ways: as an advocate, a helper, a teacher, a memory aid and a bringer of peace (John 14. 25-27). Jesus also speaks of the essential unpredictability of the Spirit (John 3. 8).

3. Looking forwards: the life of the Spirit

3.1 The 'birthday' of the Church

According to Acts, on the day of Pentecost, the church increased in numbers from 120 to 3000 people—a 25-fold increase in one day! The different tongues spoken represent the church's calling as a community called to preach the gospel 'to the ends of the earth'. The Spirit moves individuals to a deeper conversion of the heart; but it does so as part of a wider, shared, communal purpose—reaching outwards, not just inwards (the Greek word '*Ecclesia*' can mean 'the called out ones'). Despite contemporary approaches to spirituality, which are highly individualised, is clear that on the day of Pentecost the spirit speaks through a community of individuals. The spiritual gift of 'tongues' is not an act of self-expression, but a way to build up the whole body of believers (1 Cor 14:5).

3.2 Sanctification: the work of the spirit

As a parallel to *justification* (what God has done for us, in Christ — see the talk on Passiontide), theologians speak of *sanctification*—our active participation in the life of the spirit. The Holy Spirit brings spiritual gifts or 'charisms': e.g. service, preaching, teaching, healing, wisdom, inward strength, counsel, perseverance, hospitality. The fruits of the spirit are: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control** (Galatians 5: 22-23). These are the character qualities that 'grow' in Christians, through the power of the Spirit.

The work of the spirit develops over time, as things that were once 'too much to bear' (John 16:12) are revealed to the community of believers: 'As light strikes the eyes of those who come out of darkness into the sunshine and enables them to see clearly things they could not discern before, so light floods the souls of those counted worthy of receiving the Holy Spirit and enables them to see things beyond the range of human vision, things hitherto undreamed of' (Cyril of Jerusalem, 4th Century).

3.3 The Holy Trinity

The day of Pentecost 'completes' the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Spirit is not a 'free-standing' part of the Trinity, but integrally connected to Father and Son.

Next talk: Sunday 17th June: 'Three impossible things before lunch', the Trinity