

# Pentecost

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Acts 2:1 – 21, John 7:37 - 39

The story we read in Acts today is one we know well. And for many people in this church the idea of something like this happening today is longed for – the moving of the Holy Spirit in a powerful and obvious way is something to be greatly desired... no?

And for some of us there have been times when a taste of this has happened. Some went through the charismatic time in the 70s and 80s. A time when real life came back into the church that had, for many, become stayed and stale. The charismatic movement brought excitement and vitality and all kinds of new things were happening. The music changed. Church services changed. People experienced God and faith in new ways. It was the birth of many churches we see today.

And yet I wonder if even today we fully realise the implications of what a move of the Holy Spirit is.

Throughout church history there have always been moves of the Holy Spirit – spiritual enlightenment and awakenings – all over the world. Many of us know the ones that happened in the UK and USA with people such as the Wesleys, Jonathon Edwards, Moody and many many more. And there have been many more besides throughout the ages. We may have read books and heard stories that have kindled our imaginations.

Imagine if something like this happened here!! A move of the spirit that took us to places we couldn't imagine! A taste of heaven here on earth. The excitement and the energy is almost too much to hope for... to dream about.

Wouldn't it be great to see people come to Christ – people who never had any connection with God before? As I have said before the church growth in Richmond is more people church hopping than new converts. I went to another church the other week and saw quite a few people from a different church I used to attend 25 years ago there – many who made the move when things got tough at their old church.

But imagine having new converts! People who knew nothing about this incredible story of God interacting with the world – This God creating and caring, leading and warning, hoping and crying, saving and loving. People who knew nothing of Abraham or Joseph or Moses or David; Ruth or Esther or Hannah or the Prophets who spoke with such passion and insight. People who don't know anything about the life of Christ and the things he did or the things he taught us. The hope and the peace, the joy and the grace, the life and excitement.

Imagine these new people having an encounter with God and coming to church so hungry to know more and more and more. Lapping up the Bible messages, excited about worshipping this God who created all there is, motivated to learn more, experience more, want more of this faith...

People who had no hang ups about their experience in church in years gone by – either good or bad – because they have none. Everything is new. Everything is exciting. Everything is positive.

And the first conversations people have aren't about the weather or the rugby or about so and so, but about what God is doing through their lives. The changes they see happening to people who never ever knew the difference God could truly make in them – incredible differences – beyond apologetic arguments or evolution/creation debates, beyond sexual preferences and other topics that simply do nothing for those outside the church. Those things talked about in church circles that cause people to yawn and look away.

Rather there are conversations about the power of God moving in our lives every day in our work places, our homes, our friends. Beyond emotional highs that come and go – to things that remain with us from when we first wake up in the morning till we go to sleep at night - even throughout the night. Conversations about growing in faith, experiencing the utter joy in helping those in need, speaking up for those who can't, giving our excess wealth to God and breaking the power of money so many people have. Breaking chains that held us prisoner for so long. Conversations about the changes we made to our life, the choices, the thinking, the feeling... Seeing our very community begin to change in positive life-giving ways!!

Imagine church or Christian events that were a priority above all other things – the first choice. Not out of duty or obligation – but sheer pleasure in wanting to be there and to not miss out. Better than what's on TV! Better than recreational activities!! Better than the work commitments or the pleasures of simply staying home where it's warm and cosy. We want to go out because what happens— wherever it may be— it fills our lives with utter joy and excitement and satisfaction and gratification. Greater excitement than dating our first love. We want to go because there is no way we want to miss out.

It's just not the people we meet with – it's the Spirit we also encounter. And it even continues in our homes, by ourselves – this theme continues – of delving deeper and deeper into the spiritual realm of our faith. Through prayer and quietness, Bible reading, reading other books... Filling our lives with the treasures of faith and love and God. Through obedience and putting aside the things that don't give life.

Our cup overflows – beyond words. And people, more and more people, are drawn towards this light and life – hungry, thirsty, even desperate to know more, to have more, to want more of God in their life. To do more and live more for God. Faith that adores God regardless of a person's ability to sing, regardless of a person's years in a church setting, regardless of knowing the right words or the proper way to do things – whatever “proper” may mean.

New people – New growth – new excitement – new things – new wineskins. Coming through a move of the Holy Spirit! Imagine that! Wouldn't it be great!!

But be warned... such things do come with a cost – sacrifice, determination, discipline, effort and work...

The high emotional excitement doesn't last – it never does. Soon after Pentecost the practical realities took over – the care of widows, the distribution of resources, the everyday needs of people – the daily grind, the bickering, the demands of life. Then in a few short years persecution and opposition became the norm, expected. The “emotional high” of the Holy Spirit comes and it goes and if our experience and faith isn't founded in good soil there is the possibility of us drying up and welting away. Like the seed falling on rocky soil.

There is even a chance that people within the church fade in their enthusiasm and other things take greater priority – their work or recreation or family – all very good legitimate reasons - but what is our greatest priority? When the buzz is replaced by the grind and hard work, the sacrifice and the determination, and the ups and the downs of life. Where will we find the strength, the fortitude, the desire to keep going? The work of the Holy Spirit isn't simply a ride we sit back and enjoy, it is a work we do... sometimes hard frustrating toilsome. But if it is a work of God there is nothing better in this world... regardless of the cost.

The move of the Holy Spirit is like a parent giving a child a push on her bike. There is the initial thrust – but there is the need for the child to start pedalling. And when they do they realise more and more the joys of cycling and where it can take them.

Our belief is so important to our faith – it is utterly essential. Belief dictates who we see and understand of Jesus and who we are in Christ. Our belief determines how we live. In our gospel reading in John we see that before and after this passage people were discussing who this Jesus was – was he really the Messiah? And they had their assumptions as to what to base their beliefs on... signs, writings of the prophets, etc. Their beliefs dictated their actions, their response to God and for most of them it meant they did nothing except wonder a little about him.

Our belief in Christ is so important because it will dictate our response to who Christ is for us and how we respond to this. For some people they become grateful and generous, others become judgement and critical, others become blasé – even apathetic in their faith. What is our response to Christ – seen not through what we are thinking right now – but our actions throughout the week, throughout our life?

God's Spirit has come to this world in a powerful and new way. God's Spirit is still the same as it was in Acts 2. There is nothing we can do to control it or harness it. The only thing we can do is respond to it. And the reality is that for many Christians a move of the Spirit was more about attaining some kind of spiritual high rather than anything outworking. It was self-centred and it stayed within the walls of a church building.

We don't know when and how God's Spirit will move. All we can do is be ready to respond, like the faithful servants waiting for their master to return. We cannot control God, we can only respond to God. Let us be ready to respond to what he is doing in our lives – regardless of our age, our doubts, our fears...

God is working in this world. God is working in our lives. It is a good work, an exciting work, an everlasting work. Don't let the things of this world drown it out, the things of this world distract us, the things of this world rob us. God has an incredible life for each one of us to live - regardless of age, ability or anxiety.

The reality is that the work of the Holy Spirit can be hard work, it is tough and there are enough examples in history of the lives of saints who faces incredible trials. But I am certain not one of them would have changed a thing because their focus was on God, their reality was beyond this world. Let us ensure by our own faithfulness and determination that we are serving God first in this life. And my guess is that the more we truly do this the more we will actually be able to respond to God working in our life and in this community.

Jesus was under no illusions in what he was expecting from people. There is a cost and the only place it talks about a cost is in Luke 14:25ff. It costs us everything to follow Christ, to continue the work of Christ.

But the true reality will be that doing this we will experience an incredible life beyond anything we could amass for ourselves. Dying to self, living for Christ... being the body of Christ. It will be incredible!!