

May 31, 2020 – Pentecost Sunday

What is Pentecost?

In comparison to Christmas and Easter, the Christian festival of Pentecost has kind of a low profile in the Church.

The event of Pentecost, however, is one of the great watershed moments in Christian history, a moment that changed everything.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit was poured out almost always on prophets, priests and kings.

Now at Pentecost, for the first time ever, the Spirit, sent by the ascended and glorified Jesus, is poured out on all sorts of people, regardless of gender, age or social position.

Pentecost in this way represents both an ending and a beginning – it brings to a close the great cycle of events begun in Advent and it marks the beginning of the new world of God's kingdom and Christ's Church in the world.

Into all the present world, Jesus' Spirit-empowered and equipped followers are sent, 'not to take on its colour, but to reveal the new combined reality of heaven and earth, to live in that reality ...

...and to declare to the unready world that Jesus is Lord.'¹

This, more than ever, remains the calling of the Church.

And it all began at that first Pentecost.

Let's read together from Acts 2:1-13:

When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

There were Jews living in Jerusalem, religious people who had come from every country in the world. When they heard this noise, a large crowd gathered. They were all excited, because all of them heard the believers talking in their own languages. In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, "These people who are talking like this are Galileans! How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages? We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia—yet all of us hear them

¹ N.T. Wright

speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done!" Amazed and confused, they kept asking each other, "What does this mean?" But others made fun of the believers, saying, "These people are drunk!"

Message: Border Crossing (Ruth 2:1-23)

Last week, in the first Sunday of our Ruth worship series,
we talked about faith;
faith that carries us through the bittersweet seasons of our lives.
And not just our own faith in God,
but God's faithfulness to us
and his commitment to keeping
all the promises he makes to us.

The most extravagant promise-keeping of God is in Christ;
his ascension into heaven,
though bittersweet for his friends and followers,
means that Jesus is present with us always,
and will one day finish fulfilling the work
of establishing God's promised kingdom.

We saw God at work, laying the foundations for that kingdom through his Son.
And we also saw God at work in the lives of two grieving, anxious women
– Naomi and Ruth –
moving unseen and unrecognised,
preparing the soil of their lives for
a new and abundant harvest of joy.

Naomi's grief and embittered faith lay at the heart of chapter 1;
but now, Ruth begins to take centre stage in this story.
Having no one to provide for them
– no husband or son or brother or father –
it falls to Ruth to go out
into this strange new country she finds herself in,
and find what they need to survive.

Although it sounds easy enough when we read it,
Ruth is actually putting herself in great danger.
A young woman, a foreigner, unprotected and alone;
she's risking her physical safety,
exposing herself to the risks of violence and assault.
Both Naomi and Boaz recognise this,
and so she must know it herself, too.
But Ruth goes,

because she must.

And seemingly by happenstance,
she finds herself in Boaz' field.
The story of Ruth's courage
in leaving her own country and her loyalty to Naomi
has made the rounds of the community.

Boaz, moved and impressed with Ruth's character,
orders that she isn't to be harassed or assaulted,
offers her food and water and shade from the sun,
a place among the women under his protection...
...and even arranges for a little extra grain
to be left for her.

When she goes home that evening,
Naomi immediately recognises God's faithfulness,
God's hand at work in the background
in this gift of safety and abundance
provided through Boaz' generosity and Ruth's courage.
And it's not just a single days' work and provision;
Ruth went back, day after day,
until all the grain was harvested.

Even if Ruth's story ended here, which it doesn't, but even if it did,
what an amazing turn of events.
We talked about cycles of joy and loss last week
– from Naomi's bitterness of a defeated, empty return home,
from Ruth's willing loss of everything
familiar and safe for her...
...they've gone from being bitter,
empty and alone
to having community,
abundance and safety.

This part of Ruth's story is a wonderful testimony
to the reality of God working in and through ordinary people
to provide abundantly for us and for others.

But you may be wondering why we're reading it on Pentecost.
Pentecost Sunday is, after all, a celebration of a very un-ordinary event.
Pentecost is about strange and eerie whirlwinds
and fire and the cacophony of dozens of voices,

speaking one message in every language.

Pentecost is about the pouring out

of the Holy Spirit,

the birth of the Church...

not ordinary men and women, seeing to the most ordinary of needs: food, shelter, safety, and community.

But one of the most unusual and challenging aspects of Pentecost

is that bit with the languages,

where suddenly every foreigner in Jerusalem

could hear and understand

the Good News in their own language.

If you've ever travelled to a foreign country,

where the language everyone else speaks is not the same as you...

...it's a challenge.

It's hard to make yourself understood or to understand others;

it's isolating, it's frustrating

and you can't say what you mean properly,

and you know that you're not getting

the whole message

when someone tries to tell you

something important.

It always feels a bit miraculous

when someone unexpectedly

does speak enough English

at just the right moment

to explain a train timetable or flight details or directions.

The Good News of Jesus suddenly being spoken

in every language of every person within earshot...

...that's a big symbol of how God's going to grow his church,

how He's going to offer and provide abundant life

to everyone, everywhere:

by reaching out, by breaking down barriers,

by crossing borders.

And God's going to do it through

his people – the Church.

In the story of Ruth, God provides for her and for Naomi, and even for Boaz

– this is a love story, after all –

and He does it by crossing borders;

by sending people out of their comfort zones,
out of their ordinary, routine actions,
and working in them and through them.

Ruth crosses an actual national border,
leaving her homeland with Naomi,
choosing to make herself a foreigner.
She also goes out of her comfort zone,
her safe, protected space,
and goes out into the fields of Judah,
risking herself to provide
for them.

Ruth's courage and vulnerability and need are met
– not with violence or more bitterness –
but with generosity and respect.

Boaz does his own border crossing,
his own reaching out.

Because, while Ruth is the hero of this story,
her happy ending comes about through Boaz.

It would have been so easy for Boaz not to have really seen Ruth;
even if he'd spotted her in the fields,
how much simpler it would have been
to let his eyes slide past her,
to set her aside in his mind
as not his problem,
and carry on with his usual day.

Although his comfort zone is actually pretty comfortable
and he bore, as far as he knew,
no real responsibility for this foreign woman,
Boaz reaches out.

And between the two of them,
between Ruth and Boaz,
God provides abundantly.

The event of Pentecost
– the pouring out of God's Spirit,
the establishment of his people as the Church –
it's so important;
it's our beginning as the body of Christ,
as believers guided and led
by the Spirit dwelling in us.

But even more than that,
this is when we get the how-to guide

for fulfilling our marching orders.
 Jesus has been telling his disciples to go out into all the world,
 sharing the Good News...
 ...and now there's the Spirit,
 who, even in the moment of its coming,
 is showing us
 what that's going to look like.

And it's all about reaching out and going out.

We talk a lot about participating in Christ's work in the world,
 about living as followers of Jesus,
 acting as his hands, his feet and his compassionate heart.
 And even though they predate Pentecost by centuries,
 Ruth and Boaz,
 that encounter we read about,
 the relationship that develops
 over the course of the grain harvest and beyond,
 God is acting through them to do His work
 in their lives,
 as surely as Christ and the Spirit
 can work through us,
 if we allow it.

The personal qualities and values they live by
 – Ruth's courage and loyalty,
 her willingness to make herself vulnerable by going into the fields;
 Boaz' generosity,
 the hospitality and respect he offers
 to this foreign woman –
 going out and reaching out;
 and through them and in them,
 God's promises are fulfilled.

As we will see, this story is so much bigger than Naomi and Ruth and Boaz.

Although at Pentecost, we mostly focus on the fire,
 I've always thought wind was a wonderful image for the Spirit:
 we can't see it, but we see what it does
 and so we know it's there.

The same Spirit that moved over the waters at creation,
 That inspired prophets and guided kings,
 that reanimated Israel's faith again and again,

that alighted on Jesus himself at his baptism –
that's the same Spirit being poured out in our lives.

Every time we reach out to someone
with God's generous, welcoming, gracious love;
every time we have the courage to go out,
to take on the vulnerability of leaving our comfort zones
and meet people where they are
– as Jesus did –
that's the Spirit.

That's God's power, made alive in us,
working in us and through us to offer abundant life to all.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.