

Holy Spirit, open our hearts and invade our lives with the truth of Jesus as we ponder the word of God. Amen.

- *'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'* ... If you are going to dream dreams, what would they be? What is the Spirit saying to the Church today? And in particular, what do you think the Spirit is saying to St Mary's?
- If you are going to prophesy, what will you be saying? This is not just an academic question, but more of that at the end! Emma was helping us explore last week about waiting.. About how Jesus is praying for us, a prayer which started in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was something that chimed with many people, waiting for lockdown to end, waiting for life to begin.
- And today we have a picture of the disciples waiting. They have been waiting ten days since Jesus ascended, seemingly a bit immobilized. You get the feel that life is static. ...
- ... And then suddenly without warning it becomes very active indeed. *'a sound like the rush of a violent wind', 'Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them', and they 'began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability'.*
- From static to active from a pleasant hiatus to ... , well, chaos! That, apparently, is the Holy Spirit for you!
- I want to look to both readings today, from John and from Acts, to draw some conclusions from their context, to discern what the key themes are as well as what they are not, and to ask you to measure how appropriate they are for us today to help answer the first question, 'What is the Spirit saying to the Church today?'
- The first thing I noticed was that their context was oppositional. This was not the Spirit promoting peace and harmony. This was the Spirit of Jesus challenging and encountering opposition.
- In Acts you can see it when the disciples have been astonishing the crowd by speaking in their individual languages. *'All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'* Have our churches today got enough energy, to make onlookers pass any comment at all, let alone suggest we are drunk?
- To answer this. Think about how often you are ignored or actively ridiculed because of your faith. If you are, it may well be because the Holy Spirit has enabled you to speak words of truth. People don't like hearing the truth. I don't like hearing the truth. I want to be told I've done a good job, that I'm a nice person. That it's not my fault! But that's not at all what's going on in these passages. Listen to John which is much more in your face! *'he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement.*
- In John, Jesus was preparing the disciples for conflict and opposition. In Acts, on the very first occasion it was beginning to happen. Not by the whole crowd by any means, but certainly, at least by a small, vocal minority. And I don't know about you but it only takes one or two adverse comments to spoil my day. Perhaps these passages are reassuring us that it is the adverse comments that ought to be reassuring us we are having a good Spirit-filled day!
- Is the Church in opposition to the world or in sympathy with it? And which should it be? Your answer to this question may dictate what you think is the answer to some of the other questions in this sermon!
- Certainly 2 000 years ago, these passages set the scene in a very oppositional place indeed. But what other key themes do they give? Is there anything which stands out for you? I think there are four words.
- For me, the first word is truth. Particularly explicitly, in John. *'the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father', 'I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you', 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth'.*
- And the truth that the Spirit is guiding us into is that of following Jesus. *'He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.'* So according to these passages, one of the key tests about what the Spirit is saying to us today is whether it glorifies Jesus. That's the truth!
- If truth is the major theme which John emphasizes and Acts assumes, then prophecy follows a close second. Peter, in Acts, quotes from the prophet Joel to explain what is going on in the chaos of the babble in the

marketplace. *'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophecy.'*

- Please don't get the wrong idea about prophecy. Prophecy is not predicting the future. Prophecy is not fortune-telling like an aged crone reading your palm. Prophecy is speaking about the present and pointing out where our actions will take us if we continue doing the same things. Prophecy is reading the life of today with the salvation of Jesus and the judgement of God in our minds and drawing conclusions. The disciples in the market place were *'speaking about God's deeds of power'* rather than predicting the future.
- So the question is, what words of prophecy and truth do you think the Spirit is saying to the Church today?
- The third theme is immensely practical. The disciples spoke in a language that each person in the crowd could hear and understand. They spoke that way because the Spirit enabled them. They did not necessarily agree with it but they heard it and understood it. Indeed the Spirit challenges people about hard truths. Listen to these uncompromising words of Jesus in John's Gospel. *'And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement'*. That's not easy listening. That's hard truth. That's prophecy. That's effective communication! Communicating in the right way today is harder than ever. How can we as a Church spread Good News in a way people hear and understand
- And lastly? Just in case you think that the Good News is turning into rather unpleasant news. These uncompromising, blunt, extraordinary passages end on a brighter note. The fourth key theme is salvation. The end of the Acts reading today, which is only really the beginning of Peter's speech, gives us this, *'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'* In these passages, and indeed throughout the whole bible, judgement is proclaimed but it is judgement that leads to hope. Salvation. Salvation we can appreciate and experience now when we call *'on the name of the Lord'*.
- So the key themes from these oppositional passages are truth, prophecy, communication and salvation.
- What dreams should we be dreaming? What is the Spirit saying to St Mary's today?
- If you've been paying attention over the last year you'll know quite clearly what my answer to this question is. The Church's role in proclaiming the judgement and hope of God though the climate disaster which is already beginning to spread its gnarled fingers throughout the world, even in leafy North Hertfordshire. I think the signs are all around us, as Peter suggested, *'I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.'* That's quite oppositional. I also believe it is prophetic, speaking words of truth, and offering salvation.
- That's what I think the Spirit is saying to the Church today and I find these passages supportive with their themes of truth, prophecy, communication and salvation. They imply, like those first disciples, we should expectantly be waiting for the Spirit to drive us out into the wild places of Baldock to prophesy this to the people in the market place, communicating with them, like the disciples, in language they can understand..
- The PCC in our meeting last Monday, enthusiastically endorsed the idea for a parish Mission next year. Do you think the Church's response to climate change is the theme we should be following? Is this what the Spirit is saying to the Church? Are these passages the right theme passages? Because although they speak very clearly of truth, prophecy, communication and salvation, they say nothing about other Christian themes like love, peace, healing and answered prayer, all of which you may feel are what the Spirit is saying to St Mary's today.
- So very real questions which will have a distinct impact about how we as a Church live over the next 18 months. We are setting up a small planning group for the mission who would love to know your views so that this is truly a parish mission relying on the Holy Spirit rather than merely a growth initiative driven by the rector! Watch the news sheet for more details. Your views can influence the direction we head in. So prayerfully consider what you believe the Spirit is saying to St Mary's today and whether the themes of truth, prophecy, communication and salvation as explored in these passages are the right ones for us. And tell us what you think! Amen.