

Holy Spirit, fill our hearts so we may see you at work in our lives and the love of God for his vulnerable world. Amen.

- There is something incongruous about focussing on the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit, those first disciples on Pentecost, when one is in an Anglican church in North Hertfordshire. It's not just that if the Holy Spirit started speaking different languages though people in the congregation and driving them out of their seats, the churchwarden would be required to ask them to kindly pipe down and drive them out of the church.
- It's also that life in 1st Century Jerusalem was just so different from 21st Century Britain, the dangers were so different, the expectations were so different. Was the Holy Spirit really meant for them and not for us?
- Is God really expecting us to drop everything and rush outside babbling, and trust that people will understand?
- I'm not going to try to answer that question. Whatever I say, I will get it wrong. But I am going to ask if you are aware of the Holy Spirit's influence on your life today? Because I suspect that many of us, mention him in church because we are good Christians. We know the language but we don't really notice him anywhere else.
 - But if we have been baptised, we know that, as St Paul says in Romans, '*we are led by the Spirit of God.*'
- So here are some questions, using themes from our readings to help us see the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.
- First consider those tongues of flame above each of the disciples' head. They were '*all together in one place*'. They had been told to wait, by Jesus. ... Wait for the Holy Spirit. Both in Acts before this reading starts and also in John in our reading today when we heard Jesus saying to them, '*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth*'.
- They knew they were waiting, but they didn't quite know what for. What was this Spirit of truth going to be like? And Jesus had gone. He had ascended. He was not there. And they were still marked men, distrusted by the Jewish leaders, and surrounded by violent and unpredictable Roman soldiers? They stayed together because they felt there was safety in numbers but whilst they felt close to each other, do you think it might well have felt there was a bit of a gap between them and the resurrected Jesus whom they worshipped, but who had, Oh so recently, gone away from them again?
- And we read, '*Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*' I've always thought of these tongues of flame on their heads as meaning something to do with energy, with the power of the Spirit they were receiving. But just week I thought of them in context with the Paschal candle here in church, the symbol of the resurrection, with its small vulnerable flame burning. And of the baptism and confirmation candles we give out, lit from that same small flame. Baptism of course, is about turning to Christ and becoming part of his family. About becoming one with Christ, in his death and in his resurrection. About being filled with the Holy Spirit. The flame of the candle. The flame on their heads. The flame in our hearts.
- And I wondered whether the tongues of flame above the disciples' head were more to do with extending the security they felt by being close to each other, upwards, to include Jesus. Or alternatively, extending the community of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Kingdom of God, downwards, to include his beloved friends here on earth. And I have to say, that felt good. Especially when I applied it to myself. Because it seemed to be more about who we are than about something we are supposed to be doing.
- And clearly after the event, the disciples did feel much closer to the God they had given their lives to as they began to do the extraordinary things they did on that first Pentecost. Driven and empowered by the Holy Spirit, yes! But only because they knew, through the fire of the Spirit's action, that they were secure in God's love. Nurtured and close to Jesus. Not distant, but very definitely part of his family.
- So if this is right, the first question to you and me is to ask ourselves whether we, too, feel close to the living God, nurtured by the compassionate and close love of Jesus. Are you and I aware of a little tongue of flame burning on our heads, like a baptism candle, symbolising that we are owned and adopted by Jesus? That I think is the first result of being filled by the Holy Spirit, like those first disciples, 2000 years ago.
- That may be an easy question to assent to theoretically, holding a little candle, whilst sitting in a nice church that you feel at home in, and waiting to receive the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ at communion.

- But what does it mean practically? Practically, when you leave church and have that Monday morning feeling?!
- That's what the next questions tease out. But I don't think you and I can really embark on them until we have mastered this first one. So focus on whether you feel owned and nurtured by Jesus. And if you don't, then speak to me or another Christian and we will pray with you.
- The word that has been on the tip of my tongue to use a lot in the last 5 minutes is 'love'. And that's not surprising because Jesus mentions love just before he talks about sending the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.*
- We have another reminder in these short words that love is practical rather than just feeling good. Jesus does not say, 'If you love me, you will feel secure', or 'If you love me, you will feel close to me'. Actually my whole point this morning is that it's the other way round. It's difficult to love Jesus until you feel owned and nurtured by him. But when you do, you can love. And then Jesus says, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* And keeping commandments is practical not emotional. It's about loving your neighbour as yourself. It's about being prepared to make sacrifices that hurt, for other people. It's about going the extra mile when you're feeling knackered. It's about taking risks!
 - Does this ring bells with you? Are you good at going the extra mile? That's surely what it means to love Jesus. That's one of the major ways the Holy Spirit works through us. The second question. ... How does your love for Jesus express itself in practical ways? This results from knowing you are owned and nurtured by Jesus and therefore filled with the Holy Spirit..
- And let's come back to those risks you take when you love. The disciples clearly took risks. They piled into the crowd, speaking to everyone they met, in words each could understand, about the goodness and love of God, which they had discovered though the life and death and resurrection of their friend, Jesus.
- They managed this because they were filled with the Holy Spirit and finally understood that God was not distant, but close and that they were nurtured and owned by Jesus. The flame of love was alive in their hearts and they had to, just had to, tell others.
- But it was dangerous. Not least because they were open to ridicule. *'But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'* So hesitatingly, I ask you the next question. Are you prepared to be ridiculed for your faith? I'm not sure today that the risk is that we are thought to be drunk, although it could easily make the papers if we were. Rather, the risk today is that the values of Christianity are so very different from the accepted norms of the world that we are simply disregarded, thought of as preaching nonsense and talked of disparagingly behind our backs. Does that happen to you? If so, it is probably a sign that you are filled with the Spirit and living a life where the Spirit is working through you. Living dangerously. Taking risks! Filled with new wine!
- My final question is about communication, and is linked to the risks those first disciples took when they found themselves moving out of their tightknit group to speak to the sometimes condescending, sometimes aggressive, sometimes broken and sometimes welcoming people who were in Jerusalem for the Festival. They communicated without even understanding how. They communicated the Good News because they suddenly felt owned and nurtured by the love of Jesus, wanted to share it and were emboldened to take risks. If I ask you to consider how good you are at speaking the Good News of Jesus, then nearly everyone, to some extent myself included, would sadly shake their heads and suggest that God had given them other gifts.
 - However, I was very moved in one of the Sundays before Easter when we invited the congregation to gather in small groups and tell their stories of how they discovered their faith. I couldn't shut you up!
 - So I don't want to hear any more nonsense from anyone about how you don't feel you're good at communicating the Good News. Because I've heard you do it! And it was great. And you are clearly filled with the Holy Spirit. Maybe you simply need to focus on that first point, that the flame above your head is about how the Spirit draws you into a close fellowship with Jesus? Maybe you simply need to work on feeling owned, nurtured and loved by Jesus and everything else will fall into place?
- Have a great Pentecost and know that the Spirit is anointing us today. And I want to hear you speaking the Good News of Jesus!! Amen.