

“POST-PENTECOST PEOPLE”

Acts 2:1-15,38-41

It will probably not have escaped your notice, especially if you read a broad-sheet newspaper or listen to Radio 4, that there seems to be a plethora of words about at the moment that have “post-” in front of them. I don't mean Postman Pat or Post Office: I mean words like “post-modern”, “post-evangelical”, “post-colonial” and so on. They refer to movements or ideas that come in the wake of something else. Post-modernism is a term referring to the ideas and attitudes that have come after modernism (there's even a post-post-modernism movement at the moment): post-colonial (a favourite word of one of my URC colleagues from the Caribbean) is used to describe a world order that is being re-formed after the colonial and imperial expansion of the past couple of centuries: post-evangelicals are people who like to climb on band-wagons. Sometimes the word is intended to give the impression of a reaction to something else, sometimes it's about rethinking in the light of something else. Often it's about people who can't be bothered to do things properly – in Ben Elton's book *Inconceivable*, one of the narrators, a BBC producer, talks of people who come to him with “*post-comedy comedy*”, which, he explains cynically, is another word for rubbish.

The followers of Jesus who have come together to form the Church over the past two millennia are “post-Pentecost” people. We have (or should have) been affected by the amazing gift of the Holy Spirit which was bestowed on the disciples at Pentecost – and since then, things have never really been quite the same. You and I, men and women whose lives have been touched by God, who have a living relationship with Jesus, have been granted this wonderful resource of God's Holy Spirit to enable us to live and work and witness as God wants us to. On this Sunday when we mark the festival of Pentecost we're going to spend a few moments reflecting on what it is that marks off those who are “post-Pentecost” people.

To help us in that we are going to look at the second chapter of *Acts*, to see what happened to those very first “post-Pentecost” people, the earliest members of the Christian Church, as they felt the effects of the Holy Spirit on their lives and their witness. The things that happened to them are, of course, unique in that they were experiencing this for the very first time and had no real frame of reference into which to fit it. But their lives have also been very much a pattern for Christians down through the centuries as the Church has sought to make an impact on the wider world, and to bring the truths and the excitement of living Christianity into the society of the time. We are so used to the story of Pentecost and to the familiarity of living in a so-called Christian society that the tremendous impact of this story probably escapes us now – but this was a brand new thing which was happening, a completely different way of relating to God and to the world. There was a new power available to the Church, a new resource which was going to revolutionise the way in which the message of Jesus was proclaimed and lived out. After the events of Pentecost, things would never, ever be the same again. The Christian community became a radical, powerful force for change in the world. In many ways the world was turned upside down – it certainly was for the followers of Jesus themselves. I'm not so sure that's still the case. Things have quietened down a bit over the past nineteen centuries. We have forgotten what it means to be “post-Pentecost” people, and that means that our cutting edge has been blunted and the progress of the Kingdom of God has slowed a bit. So let's see what happened at the beginning and what these original “post-Pentecost” people were like.

1. UNCONVENTIONAL

The whole thing about this first Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit is that it was **unconventional**. The mould of worship and witness was broken: a new thing was happening and a new start was made. It all started in the meeting that they were at. The group of followers of Jesus spent a lot of time together in the wake of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. He had actually told them to wait in Jerusalem until the promised Holy Spirit arrived, but they obviously had no real idea of when or how that would occur. So they met regularly to pray and to share their experiences. And on the morning of the Feast of

Pentecost – a kind of early harvest festival – they had come together and were sitting around as they had done during the days leading up to the feast.

Suddenly, God arrived. There was a powerful manifestation of his presence, which they could only describe as being like a violent wind, and as they looked around it seemed as if each of them had a flame flickering above his or her head. They started talking in languages that were not their own, to the surprise of the cosmopolitan crowd who were milling around. Looking back on it, Luke can see that this was the filling of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised. Until that moment, these Christians had been like everyone else, a group of friends talking and praying together, very probably in the Temple precincts, along with hundreds of other groups of friends praising God for the Harvest and looking forward to the festivities which would form the heart of the festival. But suddenly, they stood out from all the rest, their faces aglow with excitement and their voices raised in worship to God in languages that those who had travelled to Jerusalem from all around Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East recognised as their own. It was something very different from what usually happened on such occasions.

And, their curiosity aroused, these visitors to Jerusalem listened as they heard a very unconventional message. What Peter and the others were saying was quite different from the usual preaching in the Temple courtyard. This was the proclamation of a new Messiah, a call to recognise the Lordship of a crucified saviour (v36). It broke the conventions of the time. It showed that something new and amazing was happening. And as we read on through the book of *Acts*, we read of more and more of this unconventional behaviour – a eunuch and non-Jews being accepted into God's family, miracles of healing and reconciliation, new ways of living and relating to one another, new possibilities of relationship with God. This was powerful stuff from a group of people who were unwilling to conform any longer to the old order. These “post-Pentecost” people were unconventional, alright, and they have been down through the centuries.

And as you look at the history of the Church you can see that the real “post-Pentecost” people have always stood out as unconventional, whether they have taken a stand against the idolatrous worship of Roman emperors, opposed the corruption and scandal of the Renaissance popes, struggled for the abolition of slavery, or marched against the obscenity of racial discrimination. When God's Holy Spirit gets to work, the acknowledged conventions of a godless society start to look less secure.

We, in our tradition of Christianity, have been known as “Protestants” – those who protest against the wrongs of the world around; as “dissenters” – people who stand against things they know to be contrary to the will of God as revealed in the Bible; as “non-conformists” – unwilling to conform to those things that we see as incompatible with the justice and righteousness of God. We are part of a lineage of unconventional, “post-Pentecost” people. But how far would other people say of you and me now that we are dissenters or non-conformists? How unconventional are we? We are the modern “post-Pentecost” people, but can anyone tell?

To what extent are our lives different from the lives of those around us? How much does this church represent the radical opposition to the ideas and attitudes of prevailing non-Christian culture that should be the mark of a Spirit-filled church? Are we having any impact at all? Those first Pentecost celebrants heard a radical message about the life-changing difference that Jesus can make, but they heard it in a relevant medium – their own native languages. It was a powerful message that connected with them and met them where they were. Are we wanting to have that kind of effect on people? Maybe it's difficult because those first “post-Pentecost” people were not only **unconventional**, but **uncomfortable**.

2. UNCOMFORTABLE

Peter and those other early followers of Jesus had already had some experience of being in uncomfortable situations. The things that Jesus himself had said to them weren't always easy to cope with. They'd also had to face the hostility of the authorities at the time of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. But things

were going to get even rougher for them after the Holy Spirit came. They were ridiculed by some of the crowd as they offered their worship to God in these new languages (v13). It hurts when someone accuses you of being drunk when you're not. My dad suffered from MS and his slightly odd way of walking and talking was often mistaken for drunkenness, which is particularly galling for a teetotaler! But that was mild compared to what they would have to put up with on other occasions – hounded out of synagogues, out of towns, stoned, beaten, arrested, humiliated. It was not going to be easy for these “post-Pentecost” people.

And their relatively comfortable and structured routines were going to be completely transformed, too. Their faith was no longer to be a matter of saying the right words at Sabbath prayers in the synagogue and reciting the right words at prayer-times during the day. Their property was to be shared, their riches redistributed, their comfort shattered. Being a follower of Jesus who had been touched by the Spirit of God was going to mean enormous changes and real sacrifice for them.

And it is still uncomfortable for those who take it at all seriously. As we have said before, Christianity is not simply a way of getting everything the world around you gets, but getting it a bit quicker through prayer. Being one of the “post-Pentecost” people means a radical shift in attitudes and a completely new view of the world. It means a new lifestyle, a new readiness to give up those things that have become a little too familiar and comfortable when they get in the way of God's purposes being fulfilled. It can mean identifying with the very poorest, getting alongside those to whom no-one else wants to relate, being open to God about how you spend your time, energy, money and resources. It is not comfortable. It is not easy. Being “post-Pentecost” people means living under the influence of the Holy Spirit, not under the influence of the spirit of the age.

We are so fortunate here in this part of the world. The vast majority of us are comfortably well off – at least compared to most of the world's population. We live in peace and stability. We live somewhere where going to church and having some kind of Christian connection is not everybody's cup of tea, but it's not thought too outlandish. We come along here once a week and worship with like-minded people. It is all very cosy and comfortable. And the last thing we want to do is disturb that.

The trouble is, allowing the Holy Spirit to do things in our lives might cause us to lose a bit of that comfort. We may find ourselves standing up for things that go against the grain of the people around us. We may find that “*having everything in common*” affects our lifestyle. We may find that we are ridiculed when we actually try to share with others the truth of the gospel. But that's what “post-Pentecost” people are called and equipped to do. Because God doesn't simply call us to be unconventional and get uncomfortable without any support. “Post-Pentecost” people are also ...

3. **UNASSAILABLE**

The Holy Spirit falling into the lives of those first Christians made things very different – and very difficult for them. But it wasn't all doom and despair. As they lived with the tensions of a new lifestyle and a new set of attitudes, and as they proclaimed the radical message of the Gospel of Jesus through their words and their actions, they found that God was doing great things through them. Within a couple of hours of their first experience of the Holy Spirit, they found themselves with about three thousand new converts to nurture. The power of God's Holy Spirit was not working only in and through them – he was changing other people's lives, too. And as you read on through Acts, you'll find that every now and then Luke adds a little comment to the effect that “*the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*” (2:47) or “*the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly*” (6:7). Whatever else people might have said about the message of Christianity, it was bringing results; there was real encouragement.

Of course, even while the church grew, as we have already noticed, things didn't always go smoothly for these early followers, but the Holy Spirit certainly gave them perseverance. They stuck at their task and worked hard to keep the momentum going. In a book that you can read all the way through in a couple of

hours, it's not always easy to comprehend the time scale, but there were times when it took dogged perseverance for the gospel to make headway. In Ephesus, for example, Paul preached daily in the public lecture hall for two years. There wasn't always a crowd of three thousand queuing up to be saved.

And in every situation, there was great protection, too. The adventures of these first disciples and apostles make exciting reading as they escape angry mobs, find their prison walls shattered by earthquakes and their escapes aided by supernatural beings. For “post-Pentecost” people the Holy Spirit gives encouragement, produces perseverance and provides protection.

Responding to the call to radical discipleship is not a soft option. It takes commitment and a real desire to want to see God at work. If you're happy with the way things are going, fine. Just keep plodding along and augment your uncritical acceptance of society's priorities with a dose of warm fuzzy worship on Sunday mornings. It's safe and it's comfortable. But I don't believe that's what we're called to do and called to be.

We are called to be unconventional and to expect a bit of discomfort. God would like us to branch out into new and exciting territory, to be prepared to stand up for what we believe and to speak out for justice, righteousness and the values of the Kingdom. I believe God wants to see this building bursting at the seams with people eager to hear and to grow in the truth of the gospel – not just this building, but every church building, every public building in this city. I believe that God wants us to live lives that are so transparently filled with his Holy Spirit that other people cannot help but be attracted to the person of Jesus. I believe that he wants us to live as “post-Pentecost” people, despite the difficulties it might cause us.

And I believe that if we commit ourselves in faith to living and working and worshipping and witnessing as he wants us to, he will make us an unassailable people – “post-Pentecost” people with real perseverance, “post-Pentecost” people who are protected and preserved by the power of the Holy Spirit, “post-Pentecost” people who begin to see and to experience and to be encouraged and to be amazed and to be excited by the power of God at work in the world today. The Holy Spirit wasn't just for a bunch of first century Christians: the Holy Spirit is for all God's people, for every age and every place and every situation – for you and for me.

Do you want to see God undeniably at work in your life and, through you, in your city, your village, your workplace, your street, your home? Are you willing to ask God for that to happen, despite the changes it might mean for you, despite the problems it might bring? [You see, you can spend time writing up a church profile, but that profile can reflect only the people who are a part of the church.] Because, if you are, then God has blessings in store for you that you've never dreamed of – and blessings in store for this church and this city. You and I are “post-Pentecost” people. Let's get on and live like it!

“Spirit of God, come in and release our hearts to praise you. Show us your power, we pray, that we may share in your glory: we shall arise and go to proclaim your works.” We're going to sing those words of Chris Rolinson in a few moments, but first, let's pray that God will touch us, will fill us with his Holy Spirit and make us true “post-Pentecost” people. And while I pray, if you really want to know the power of the Holy Spirit, right where you're sitting, just hold out your hands to receive in faith what God has for you.

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The mould of worship and witness was broken: a new thing was happening and a new start was made. It all started in the meeting that they were at. On the morning of the Feast of Pentecost Jesus' followers had come together and were sitting around as they had done during the days leading up to the feast. Suddenly, God arrived. Until that moment, these Christians had been like everyone else, but suddenly, they stood out from all the rest. As you look at the history of the Church you can see that the real "post-Pentecost" people have always stood out as unconventional. When God's Holy Spirit gets to work, the acknowledged conventions of a godless society start to look less secure.

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Questions for discussion

To what extent are our lives different from the lives of those around us who are not Christians?

How much does Wade Street Church represent the radical opposition to the ideas and attitudes of the prevailing non-Christian culture? Are we having any impact on our community? How could we speak our more effectively?

Do you find being a Christian is uncomfortable? If so, in what ways?

What would you find most difficult to cope with is the Holy Spirit really disturbed us?

In what ways could we say that the Holy Spirit protects us?