

## St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Acts 2: 1 - 21

How does it feel to be on your own? How does it feel to stick your neck out? How does it feel to take a stand, alone? How does it feel to be singled out, you alone identified? How does it feel to be the only one in the village or the room or the meeting place who is like you?

'They were gathered together in one place,'<sup>1</sup> wrote Luke in the reading we heard this morning, the same Luke who wrote the Gospel, and who also wrote the book of Acts. They were gathered together in one place on that first Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus had appeared to them. We now recognise that day as the moment when these disciples were filled with such a holiness of spirit that they found the courage and the determination to establish themselves as a community committed to ensuring that the life Jesus continued to live in this world.

That day though was not the first time we have heard about this group of people, who had followed Jesus during his life, gathering together in one place after his death. They did this a number of times in different places – in Jerusalem in an upper room, and in Galilee by the lakeside, for example.

Why would they do that? Why would they gather together in one place in the days and the weeks following Jesus' crucifixion? After all, gathering together wasn't the very first thing that they did around about that time. The very first thing that they did after Jesus was arrested during the night prior to his crucifixion was the opposite of gathering together, they scattered. At the moment of his arrest it wasn't a case of how can we support each other in this dreadful moment? Instead, it was every man for himself.

Perhaps they thought that it was better for them at that moment to run away, to be as far as possible from anyone associated with Jesus. Perhaps it felt safer. After all hadn't he said to them in the days before his death that he wouldn't leave them alone, that whatever happened he would send a Comforter to be with them?

Whatever the reason for fleeing in to the night, it didn't last. Being out in the world, on their own, didn't feel safe, and the promised spiritual Companion never materialised. So, quite quickly they started to gather together again. First in twos or threes - on the road to the village of Emmaus, for example. Then, they *all* came together in one place. And it was when they did that, when they were all together, that things started to change.

In that room, in that place, when they were all together, something happened, something that they struggled to describe. It was as if there was something blowing threw them, it sounded like a driving wind, and it set their spirits aflame. Luke isn't the only one to write about this. John, in his Gospel, also recounts it. Jesus breathed on them, said John. And their spirits were filled with excitement, such excitement that they rushed to tell their absent friend Thomas what had happened.

In Luke's telling of it their spirits were set on fire, and the noise that they had heard dragged them out the doors of the house and in to the street, and there their chins were wagging with the story of Jesus that they could no longer repress. One of their number, Peter, fired up, stood up and preached the Gospel for the first time.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2: 1

Some said they were filled with an alcoholic spirit, but for them, this felt like a holy moment. After all, a wind like that, and this burning desire were divine, were they not? Was it not a divine wind that blew over the chaos of the world at creation? Surely, that was what the noise was - like a driving wind - that they had heard outside? And, was it not from a bush aflame and burning, but not consumed, that Moses heard the very voice, the words, of the Word of God? Was this what was happening to them? Weren't their hearts aflame, burning, with such a desire to tell the story in words of Jesus? This was a holy moment for them, this was a Holy Spirit that was with them.

They were all together in one place when this happened, but they wouldn't remain together for long. This divine wind, their enflamed spirits, their wagging chins, their desire to tell the story drove them not just out of the house and in to the street, but out in to the world as well, all in different directions with the Word on their lips ready to be preached.

And they travelled far and wide, across the Roman world, which we read about in the letters that follow the Book of Acts, but in legend also they are known to have travelled east to India and south to Sudan. But, though they were out in the world, they didn't remain alone. They found that, now with the spirit at their backs and in their hearts, there were people in the world who heard the message, who accepted it.

So, they formed communities, churches, places for those people who heard and accepted their message to gather together in one place, for they knew that it was when you are gathered together then the Spirit can really move. They returned to Jerusalem also, from their travels, periodically, themselves to gather together again whenever the very big decisions had to be made; big decisions after all require a burning spirit, and a fair wind at your back.

They had walked a road with Jesus. They had witnessed his crucifixion. They believed that they had seen Jesus again, transformed, resurrected. When they gathered together in those days and weeks following, they had been filled with spirit that felt divine, that sounded like a driving wind, that felt like a burning force, and this spirit had driven them out in to the world.

'They were gathered together in one place,'<sup>2</sup> just as we have gathered here this morning. What do we expect from this act of gathering together, of forming a church out of our faith, of praying and singing and reading together the Word of God? What do we expect to happen? Spiritual nourishment? Our souls enflamed? A determination to follow Jesus Christ? An expectation to see him alive in the world today? Do we expect to be driven out, to rush out in to the streets, blown out in to Corstorphine, our spirits enflamed?

This week I and three of the other parish ministers in Corstorphine, and the industrial chaplain who is attached the Old Parish here in Corstorphine gathered together in one place - the beautiful retreat centre in Perthshire called the Bield - for a day, to talk about what we could do together here in Corstorphine, how we might together enflame faith in this part of this city. Together we gathered, because after all it can be lonely being a minister on your own.

We drew a picture together, a map of Corstorphine. But, it wasn't a geographical map, it was a demographic one. Where are the places in this area of Edinburgh where there are Christians, and people sympathetic to the church and to our faith? So, we drew people on to the map, Christians, people who hear or engage with the Gospel. We used the colour red to draw them - flaming red. We drew them where the church buildings are, of course. Then, we realised, that they are in other places too. They are in the care homes where we take services, so we drew them there. They are in the schools that we go in to, so we drew them

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2: 1

there. The chaplain is present at the Gyle and at the airport, and even in Costa coffee, so we drew them there.

At the end of the day we resolved that we ourselves would meet regularly, weekly, in The White Lady, out there - before ten o'clock, so there'll be no alcohol involved. We wouldn't want to be accused of drunkenness if the Spirit moves us.

That demographic map of Corstorphine showed us that people of faith, Christians, are everywhere. They are there when you drop-off the kids at school. They are there when you visit your mum or dad in a care home. They are there when you go for a coffee. They are there when you go shopping. They are there in the streets. Out there we are not alone; we are never alone.

If I was to look for a metaphor to describe the Christian presence here, then I think it would be salt. We are salt here in this part of this city.

Perhaps the question is, then, how might we shine like light? How does love glow in us? How do we speak with tongues about the Gospel in a way that makes sense to other people, just as, on that first Day of Pentecost, those first disciples spoke, babbled, in their enthusiasm and somehow people understood?

Perhaps it is confidence, the confidence that comes knowing that you are not alone. When we gather together, we gather to remind ourselves that we are not alone. We gather with an expectation that we will be enflamed. We gather with to feel the noisy Spirit move around us, like a driving wind. After all, before he was crucified, he had promised that he would send someone, a Holy Spirit, to be with us in this world, and he did. It is here when we gather together, and it is with us when we go out in to the world - where we are never alone.