

In some ways, Pentecost marks the birth of the church. Jesus had said to the disciples (in Matthew 28.19), “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. Now, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit to equip them for this task. That task has of course been passed on down the ages, and now it is ours.

But we see the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the Bible. At the very start, the Holy Spirit brings life. In Genesis 1.2 we read, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters”. The word translated as Spirit is RUACH. This can mean ‘breath’, which links to Genesis 2.7, where we hear how “the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”. There is also the dramatic picture in Ezekiel 37.1-14, where God breathes new life into the dry bones (which symbolised the people of Israel who had wandered away from God). In Acts 2.2-4, we read that there was a sound like a strong wind blowing, and all of the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. Here the word translated as Spirit is PNEUMA, which again can mean ‘breath’ (and is the source of our word ‘pneumatic’).

Today, might we be like those dry bones in Ezekiel? Let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit to breathe new life into us.

It is through the Holy Spirit that the disciples received the strength and courage that they needed to proclaim the Good News of what God had done for humankind through Jesus. The Spirit brings empowerment. In Isaiah 61.1, the writer says, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news”. In Acts 1.8, Jesus tells the disciples that, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth”. The word translated as ‘power’ is the source of our word ‘dynamo’, a form of battery. We see the effect of this empowerment in Acts 4:31, which recounts that the disciples “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly”.

In John’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit is given the name ‘Advocate’ (for example in John 15.26). Some versions of the Bible use the word ‘Helper’ (or in the King James Bible, ‘Comforter’). The word being translated is PARAKLETOS. This word means strengthener, encourager, someone to stand by you.

In John 14.16, Jesus promises the disciples, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth”. As Paul says, in Romans 8.26, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness”. We see this in operation in 1 Kings 19.12: the prophet Elijah is exhausted. He feels that he simply can’t go on. Then, he receives strength, not from the ‘great and powerful wind’, or the earthquake, or the fire, but rather in the “gentle whisper” (a “still small voice” in the King James Bible). The NRSV translates this quite poetically as “a sound of sheer silence”.

When we feel that sense of physical or spiritual exhaustion, we should try to be still, so that we hear that gentle whisper, that still small voice. As God says through the Psalmist (in Psalm 46.10), “Be still, and know that I am God”.

As well as strengthening and sustaining us, the Holy Spirit guides us. In John 14.26, Jesus tells the disciples that, “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you”. In John 16.13, Jesus says that “the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth”. Isaiah is referring to the work of the Spirit when he says (Isaiah 30.21), “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”.

As Jesus said in his prayer to the Father at Gethsemane, “not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22.42). We need to open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we can discern God’s will for us.

If we are Spirit-filled people, our lives will bear what is described in Galatians 5.22-23 as the “fruit of the Spirit”, namely, “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. It is the Holy Spirit who helps us to be the people God wants us to be. People who put his love into action. As Paul says ,when speaking about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12.4, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them”. The Holy Spirit equips us for our mission.

So, as we celebrate this feast of Pentecost, let us open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and allow him to strengthen us, encourage us, equip us and guide us.

God of power, may the boldness of your Spirit transform us, may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us, may the gifts of your Spirit equip us to serve and worship you now and always. Amen.