Spreading Fire: The Mission Begins
Acts 2:1-21

So we're going to look at this extraordinary event called Pentecost, where Luke describes how the Holy Spirit first came upon the early church. And to say that Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit are crucial to real, vibrant Christianity would be an understatement, wouldn't it? Just picture an empty balloon, flat and limp; or a kite lying on the ground; or a dead body, wrapped in a shroud, in a mortuary. They all have one thing in common don't they? An absence of breath. The balloon should be filled, the kite should soar, the body should breathe.

And John Stott, the well-known Anglican minister and author wrote, 'as a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.' The Spirit is simply indispensible to the normal Christian life. As the Nicene Creed says, 'we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life.' There is no life, no real vibrant Christian life, apart from the Spirit.

So, let's read Luke's account of the coming of the Spirit, and then the first part of Peter's speech which follows it.

Acts 2:1-21

Luke describes 3 phenomena associated with the coming of the Spirit: wind, fire and tongues, so our first three points are going to look at each of those: The Power that Changes, the Presence of God, Unraveling the Curse, and then we're going to finish up by looking at the Message of Joy.

The Power that Changes
Look at verses 1-2 again: 'When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.'

So this group of 120 or so men and women are together, most likely doing what Luke told us they gave their time to, praying, when they were overtaken by this noise. And notice how Luke describes it, it was *like* a mighty rushing wind. It wasn't a mighty rushing wind, but the closest thing these guys could describe it as was being caught in a storm. Now, I don't know if you've ever gone out in one of these terrific gales, but when you do, and you feel the full force of the wind, and you can lean into it, and you can't walk, and you can't catch your breath, the sheer power and force of it, that's what they're describing. And these disciples are sat there, and it's as if this tornado fills the house.

So the first mark of the Spirit's coming was power – just as Jesus said it would be in Acts 1:8 – 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.'

And there's perhaps no more moving or dramatic example of the change the power of the Spirit can bring upon a life, when someone is filled with Him, than that of Peter. You see, just a few weeks before, on that fateful night and early morning of Jesus' betrayal and trial, Peter, so full of his own bravado, so full of his own ability – 'even if all deny you and leave you Jesus, I never will', so full of his own 'can do' – was left floored by a servant girl. As he fought and failed under his

own fear and instinct for self-preservation, betrayed Jesus, and walked away and wept.

But now, filled with the power of the Spirit, Peter is transformed, and goes out into the same city that had so recently crucified Jesus and tells them this same Jesus is Lord of all. The man who so recently fell before the simple questions of a servant girl, now stands before a crowd of thousands and doesn't waver.

But Peter isn't the only one who needs change and transformation, is he? We all do. If we are honest with ourselves, as we look inside, we all see these holes, these areas where we know we are deficient – holes of love and courage; holes of patience and grace and selflessness. Of what we should be, but fail to attain. And when we face challenges and seemingly insurmountable difficulties in our lives, we look at this thing and it seems so much bigger than us, so overwhelming, that we wonder where we will ever find the strength to overcome it, to live through it. And then, of course, like Peter, there is the issue of our Christian witness. How many of us could say, 'yes I'm as bold, and as sensitive, to take the message of Jesus' love and grace out there into a needy world, as I could be'? So for the honest, in life there is this realization that we are not where we need to be, that change is needed.

And yet, this is where Christianity parts company with the world. Because our culture tells you that you have this power to change inside you. That all you need to do is call on the real you, and draw on your own inner resources, a kind of spiritual pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. And you can do this, you're the solution to your problem.

But of course, the Bible tells us something different doesn't it? It tells us that far from you and me being the solution, we're the problem, and that we need a power from outside of us, external to us to bring about the change within us that we so desperately need. And that was the case for Peter and his friends, and it's the case for you and me. And the story of Pentecost is that God, in his love and mercy, sends that power, His own Spirit, to fill us and transform us.

The question of course is 'how?'

Which brings us to the second phenomena, the tongues of fire.

The Presence of God

Verse 3: 'And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them.' So just as those who were there said the sound was *like* a mighty rushing wind, they do the same with these tongues which were *as if* they were fire. Can you see how they're struggling to convey what it was that they were experiencing?

And that's no wonder given what they *were* experiencing. You see, frequently in the Old Testament, when God appeared to his people, fire (*and* smoke for that matter) was not far away. When he first makes his covenant with Abraham, God appears in a vision as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch; he appears to

Moses in a burning bush; he leads the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt in a pillar of fire; when he makes a covenant with the people at Sinai, he came down upon the mountain in fire; the psalmist says that 'fire goes before Him' (Ps 97:4) and when Isaiah the prophet sees the Lord high and lifted up, he is surrounded by burning seraphs, and smoke fills the temple, and a burning coal is taken from the altar to purify his lips.

So, fire is this potent image of God's manifest presence, of His glory. And at Pentecost once more God comes down in his Spirit in fire. But what is extraordinary here is how this fire that they see spreads to each one of them. It's not just Peter, or the apostles who are touched by the presence of God, it's not just some religious elite, it's all of them. And that's extraordinary because things were very different in the past, weren't they? In the past, to see God like this would strike terror into a person's heart. You didn't expect to survive the experience.

In fact, when Solomon built the temple, a place for God's presence to dwell, he sensibly asked the question, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). I mean, is it really possible that a high and holy God would dwell among men?

But what we see happening here at Pentecost is that this presence of God that used to strike terror, and the Spirit who would come on a few specific leaders, maybe for a specific task, was now poured out upon everyone in the room.

Which is why Peter in his first sermon, turns to the prophet Joel and says, v16, 'This is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: "'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.'

And it begins to be fulfilled at Pentecost – that from now on, in these last days, God's Spirit, his Presence is available to all, not just a few. Regardless of age, regardless of sex, regardless of social standing or position, God comes and fills his people with himself, and what was the reserve of a few becomes the routine experience of all.

And it's this indwelling of the Spirit – the presence of God himself in your life - that begins the transformation that we all need. That as we allow him, the Spirit slowly, but surely, makes us more like Jesus. You see, at the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples that the Spirit "will glorify me, for he will take from what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). That it's the Spirit who takes all that Jesus is, and has done for us, and makes it a living reality in our lives.

So, it's the Spirit, Paul says, who pours the love of God into our hearts (Rom 5:5) – that when the Spirit fills you, he speaks to your heart and refreshes your heart like a cold drink refreshes on a hot day, and tells you how much God loves you,

that Jesus would give his life for you. And as that love of God fills your heart, it melts and softens it with love for God and for others in response. And it does so in a way that begins to lay the axe to the tree of our own self-centredness.

And when the Spirit fills you, he tells you in the words of Romans 8:16, that you are a beloved child of God: 'The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' And so just as Jesus heard the voice of the father at his baptism as the Spirit descended upon him, saying, "this is my beloved son," so the person filled with the Spirit knows deep down that they are God's child and that their heavenly father loves them with a never-ending love, not because they've earned it or done enough to deserve it, but because of what Jesus has done. That, in Christ, we're chosen and adopted by our father. And so the Spirit works to turn back your feelings of fear, of rejection, of self-loathing, because he speaks tenderly to you that you are a loved child of a loving father.

And it's the Spirit, Paul says, who brings out his fruit in our lives: the fruit of 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal 5:22-23). Character traits that look suspiciously like Jesus!

And yet, it's not all inward. You see, as the Spirit takes from what is Jesus' and declares it to you, as he applies the gospel to your heart, it inevitably results in outward change as well. You see having told us to 'be filled with the Spirit' – meaning to go on being filled with the Spirit - in Ephesians 5:18, Paul immediately says, 'addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart' (Eph 5:19). So, as the Spirit fills you, and speaks to you of God's love for you in Jesus, of his choosing and adopting you, of making you his child, of his forgiving you and restoring you, how can we not sing in response? How can we not, with these first disciples, speak out the mighty acts of God in joy-filled praise? So as we're filled with the Spirit, it can't help but result in more praise and worship to the God of infinite love.

But as well as worship, there's going to be prayer bubbling up. And that's prayer not just in the good times, when it feels easy, but in the hard times, when words fail us and our hearts are hurting. As Paul says in Romans 8, 'The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words' (Rom 8:26). You see, as the Spirit tells us we are loved and chosen by Jesus, when life is hard and days are dark he will also be directing our hearts to where our real hope and help lies, which is our all-wise and all-loving God whose plans for us never falter or fail.

But perhaps what Pentecost best tells us about this outward transformation is how the Spirit turns our inner self-centredness around into an outer, practical love for God's people. You see, the spiritual gifts that the Spirit gives to each one of us are for the building up of the church. And the apostle Peter was once taken up by his own bravado, and tripped up on his own desire for self-preservation and protection, his own self-centredness; but filled with the Spirit, and equipped with his gifts, Peter goes out into the city in the Spirit's power to speak about

Jesus and to build up his church. And so, as the Spirit fills us, Jesus's love for his people becomes our love, and he equips each of us to help build and encourage and love his church. And so, when you're filled with the Spirit, you can't just be a consumer, can you? You can't be a bystander. To be filled with the Spirit inevitably means Jesus' mission to love and serve and save his people becomes your mission.

Which brings us to the third phenomenon of Pentecost – tongues.

Unravelling the Curse

Verse 4: 'And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.' Verse 6: 'And at this sound the multitude [from every nation under heaven] came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.'

So, the timing is perfect, isn't it? Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims for the feast. Jews and converts to Judaism from across the world all converge on the city, and they hear the message of God's love and grace to us in Jesus, and those same people, when they head back home, will take that message back to their synagogues, and the gospel spreads and seeds itself across the world.

But there's something deeper going on here as well. You see, back in the OT it tells us the story of how there came to be so many different languages and cultures in the first place. It's the story of Babel, or babble, if you like. And people wanted a religion without God; in fact, they wanted to be God (does that sound familiar?). And so they set out to build a tower that would reach to heaven, to make a name for themselves. It's a fascinating commentary on our desire to be at the centre, to be the ones who call the shots, to have the universe revolve around us. And to frustrate that, God mixes up their languages. It's the curse of Babel. And from that time onward, in this whole cultural mix and mélange, there was only one language and one culture in which God's grace was mediated and that was in Hebrew through the nation of Israel.

But at Pentecost, can you see how Babel is being undone? And the curse begins to be unraveled. And in place of man trying to be like God, and building this tower, this ladder to heaven, God, in his Spirit, comes down. And in place of confusion, God speaks his message of grace in every language, in the most familiar way possible, in ways that everyone could understand.

And so the fascinating thing is that the gospel does not try and impose one single culture. It's not like Islam with its insistence on Arabic, or the globalization of secular western culture – where everyone must think the same. The gospel doesn't say you have to hear God speak in this one language, and worship in these and only these ways. The gospel goes out into all these cultures, in multiple languages, reaching people where they are.

So whilst the gospel speaks to every culture, bringing real change, there's no flattening or homogenization of culture. That you can't say 'you've got to conform yourself to the way we do it, in our culture'. Rather, it's possible to be

genuinely Chinese and genuinely Christian, genuinely American and genuinely Christian, genuinely Nigerian and genuinely Christian, as the Spirit gathers from every tribe and tongue and people and nation a people to glorify God. And so, when the Spirit fills you, there is this genuine appreciation and love and reaching out to others of different language and culture in the gospel, there is this deep heart unity even in diversity, because what unites us is not culture but Christ.

But finally, after these three phenomena of wind and fire and tongues, and the disciples go out into the streets, most likely into the temple courts, which is the only place that could accommodate so many people, Peter stands up and preaches.

A Message of Joy

Now, the word 'Pentecost' is one of those words that sort of tells you what it means, doesn't it? Pente-cost – 50th day – 50 days after Passover. And it was one of the three great Jewish festivals: it was the feast of weeks, the feast of Harvest, 7 weeks after Passover, when they gave thanks for the harvest. And so it's incredibly fitting that it's at Pentecost that this harvest of people happens, the first fruits of this ingathering of the gospel.

But Pentecost also came to be a celebration of something else. You see after the first Passover, when the people of Israel were delivered from slavery in Egypt, they walked through the desert to Mount Sinai. And at Sinai God came down in wind and smoke and fire and gave the Law. And Pentecost became a celebration of the giving of the Law. But at Sinai, just one man, Moses, went up the mountain to meet with God, and everyone else trembled in fear below, begging that they not hear the voice of God.

But at this Pentecost, things are very different aren't they? In place of fear, there's joy, in place of one man, there's every man and woman, and as the disciples spill out onto the streets it's like closing time on a Saturday night. And Peter has to tell the crowd, we're not drunk – it's only 9 in the morning!

Now, why is that? Why this difference between the giving of the law – the first Pentecost if you like – and this one? Why does one result in fear and terror, and the other overflowing joy, when both are encounters with God? Well, when you realize the standard that you and I have to meet to approach God, when you think that you have to meet a certain level and attain a certain degree of righteousness to be acceptable to God, it inevitably ends in despair. And the threat of judgment for our failure ends in terror. And that's the Law.

But when you hear the gospel – what these disciples go out into the street proclaiming – verse 11, 'the mighty works of God' – how Jesus was incarnated and lived as a man, and perfectly fulfilled the law for us, and did for us what we could never do, and died upon the cross, taking the separation from God that we deserve upon himself, and how God has raised him up from death, and seated him at his right hand, and how he now pours out his Spirit upon all who put their trust in him and not themselves – that's what results in joy!

You see, as Peter starts preaching and quotes from the prophet Joel, he doesn't stop Joel's quote where he could have stopped it, after Joel's promise of the Spirit's coming. Instead, Peter continues the quote to include when Joel talks of the judgement to come, when the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the day of the Lord. And the quote ends, v21, 'And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

And the gospel, the good news of Jesus, results in deep lasting joy that doesn't leave a hangover, and it's this message of joy to be taken into the streets, when the Spirit fills you and speaks it to your heart, and you realize that Jesus has taken the judgement for our failure to keep the Law upon himself – that when he died on the cross the sun was darkened, and the full-moon of Passover would have been turned red in the eclipse, that all who call upon him might be saved.

So, as we watch these disciples, filled with the Spirit, rejoicing in grace and declaring God's mighty works, let's heed Paul's words and go on being filled with that same Spirit. Because when it comes to the Spirit, we can never say, 'been there, done that, got the t-shirt', because these same disciples who are filled here are getting filled again in chapter 4. So let's be praying, 'God, fill me afresh with your Spirit, take from what is Christ's and speak it to my heart.' Because that's the prayer of the person who knows that they can't, but that Jesus can.