

Filled with the Spirit

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[0 : 0 0] Looking together this morning at Acts chapter one and two, the passage that we read earlier. Last Sunday was Pentecost, Sunday, and that's the Sunday in the year when we particularly remember the gift of the Holy Spirit, when the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples, just as the Son was taken up to be with the Father. So the Spirit came down upon God's people. Pentecost is about God, it's about God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's about the gift of the Holy Spirit for us, but it's also about who we are, and that's what I want to focus on this morning. I want to think about things that are said in this passage that help us to understand what we should be as the church, as God's people. The first of those words, I've got four words for us to think of. The first of those words is the word together, together.

Three times a year, the people of Israel were to be together. They were to come from different parts, initially, of that promised land, and then by the time of the Acts of the Apostles, by the time that we joined the story here, they were coming from across the world on three occasions. There was the most important festival feast of the Jewish calendar, which was Passover. Passover was the time when God redeemed his people. He set them free. He made them a nation at Passover. Then there were two other festivals, one of which was Pentecost, the one that we're talking about here, which was a harvest festival, of which there were three in total. Then the other one, Tabernacles, was later in the year. We're talking April, May, and October. Three times a year, the people of Israel were to be gathered in Jerusalem. That's why there was such a crowd who then heard what happened later on.

The people were to have gathered from across the country. At this stage then, they're coming from across the world, from every nation under heaven. We're going to have a look at that list of places and nations, slightly later on this morning. The Feast of Pentecost, the particular festival that's talked about here, was seven weeks from just after Passover. The way in which it worked out is the day that Jesus rose from the dead was day one, and then day 50 would have been the day of Pentecost. It would have been on the same day of the week, Sunday, by our reckoning. In the Jewish understanding, although this isn't particularly in the Bible, because they were thinking of, well, what happened at Passover, and where would the people of Israel have been 50 days after Passover, well, they would have been at Sinai receiving the law. This harvest festival was also in the mind of the Jewish people connected with the giving of the law. That may be significant as well, to try and understand why on this particular day the Holy Spirit was given. So on that same festival day as the people of Israel were gathered, there was another gathering, and that was the gathering of the followers of Jesus. There were the 11 disciples, Judas no longer alive. There were the female disciples of Jesus who were not apostles. There was the mother of Jesus, and there were his brothers and possibly also his sisters. We know the names of four of Jesus' brothers, and at least two of them were definitely believers, James and Jude. In total, 120 people who'd been part of the group that had followed Jesus were gathered together in the upper room, and they were praying. And the reason they were praying was because Jesus had said after he'd risen from the dead that they should wait. So even though they knew about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, they didn't go out straight away to proclaim that. They were to wait. They were to wait for the giving of the Holy Spirit, and that is what the people were praying for. In that room, 120 people, and this was day 10 of the prayer meeting. So this was the 10th day that they'd been gathered together praying in this way, and it was nine o'clock in the morning. By their reckoning, the day starts at six o'clock, and so the third hour would have been nine o'clock in the morning by our reckoning. So the first thing that we see is that the people were together. Together.

The second thing we see is that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Now if you had been present on that particular Sunday, on that particular day of Pentecost, then there were particular things that would have been observable to the human eye or the human ear. First of all, there was a sound of mighty rushing wind filling the house. Secondly, we see that there were divided tongues of fire. Tongues here is simply describing how fire separates and separated on top of each of the individual people there. Each of the 120 people had a tongue of fire descending and resting on them.

[5 : 40] Presumably that would have been visible even for someone who didn't accept what was happening. And then the third thing which would have been observable, the third phenomenon, was that they spoke in other languages. It says that very clearly, and we'll come back to that later on, they spoke in these other languages. What wasn't visible, but the spiritual reality behind all of this is that these group of 120 followers of Jesus Christ were filled with the Holy Spirit on that Pentecost Sunday. Now the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead of the Trinity, was not unknown to the disciples before Pentecost. It's not true to say that no one had ever heard of the Holy Spirit and all of a sudden on the day of Pentecost he makes his appearance. Right at the start of the Bible, just at the moment as God is creating the heavens and the earth, it says that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

David, King David, having sinned was concerned that he would be left and abandoned by God. And he says, take not your Holy Spirit from me. So David had some experience of the Holy Spirit.

And then Jesus, when he was speaking to his disciples before having been crucified, before having risen from the dead, before the Holy Spirit had been given in the way described here, says to his disciples about the Holy Spirit, you know him. So you know the Holy Spirit for he dwells with you, and he will be in you. So the Holy Spirit was not unknown to the people of the Old Testament, and he was not unknown to the disciples before this moment of Pentecost. But at this moment, the disciples, the 120 received more than they'd had before. Jesus describes what happens. In these words, he says, you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit. You will receive power. In other parts of the Bible, it talks about how we have received the Spirit of adoption by which we cry out,

Abba Father. And Jesus spoke, and there's other passages we can talk about, but Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit as streams of living water. This is what the disciples, the 120 received on that Pentecost Sunday. That's what they needed to wait for. They weren't ready until they'd received this. Now the circumstances are different for us. And the staging is different. We don't have this gradual staging where Jesus has risen from the dead in this time of waiting. But the gift of the Holy Spirit is the same. It's the gift that we receive as believers. We receive it right at the start, right at the moment that we become Christians, as we hear the message of the gospel and believe we receive the Holy Spirit. That's what Paul asks, rhetorically asks, the church in Galatia when he writes in his letter, did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by the hearing of faith?

And as we hear the gospel with faith, we receive the Holy Spirit. But that's not the end of it. It's not that we receive the Holy Spirit once and that is the end of our experience of God's Holy Spirit. Paul goes on in that same passage in Galatians and he says, he who supplies the Spirit to you and you and I, as it says in Ephesians, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit again and again, just as we need in other respects to be praying and believing, we need to be receiving the Holy Spirit constantly. So the second thing that was true about those believers and is to be true about God's people, as well as being together, that we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit at the point of coming to faith and throughout our Christian lives, we need the Holy Spirit. We're not capable of living our Christian lives simply on the understanding of the truth or simply in our own commitment to Jesus Christ. We need God's Holy Spirit in order to live the Christian life. We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. There's a third thing which we can see and again, this is something that happened to the 120 and is also to be true of God's people and it's the word declaring, declaring. As we receive the Holy Spirit, just as the 120, we declare the mighty works of God. They were all filled and began to speak and it wasn't just the apostles who began to speak because the list of places and peoples is more than 11 and I think we're to understand that all 120 began to speak to declare the mighty works of God, the big works of God, the mega works of God. That was what they were declaring, that's what they were saying. Now, this is quite an Old Testament phrase. It reminds us, for example, of Psalm 71, 19, your righteousness, O God, reaches the high heavens. You have done great things, O God, who is like you. Or even more, the prayer of Jesus' mother Mary. If you remember in Luke chapter 1, we have some prayers that things that Mary said and this is one of the things that she says in her prayer. For he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.

[11 : 38] These great things anticipated in the Old Testament and of course experienced by Mary, the mother of Jesus, the great works, what God did through Jesus Christ. This is what the disciples, having been filled with the Spirit, were declaring. I can imagine them singing it, maybe they were saying it, but they were saying it joyfully for all to hear. That's the way it should be as we're filled with the Holy Spirit. We want to declare, we want to be saying those things that God has done in Jesus, giving praise to God for the gospel and telling others about the mighty works that he's done in Jesus Christ. Again, that's quite similar to something that Paul the apostle says in the letter to the Ephesians. This is for Ephesians chapter 5 and starting at verse 18. Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. The reception of the Holy Spirit is invisible. In this case, there were some signs, but there aren't always signs to accompany. So what is the sign that the

Holy Spirit is present in our lives? Or we can see it in this verse as we address one another in spiritual psalms and songs, as we're giving thanks to God for Jesus Christ and as we submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, these are the signs of the Holy Spirit's filling and presence. And it's something that we find in the Bible. It's almost a principle that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The things that we say say what's on our hearts.

And when we're joyful and happy and thankful and rejoicing, is that what comes out of our lips? Is that what our heart is full of to declare the mighty works of God? I think it's good to ask what is on our heart and to be asked again that God would fill us with this Holy Spirit, that we would declare His mighty works and particularly His mighty works in Jesus.

So we've looked at three things that are to be true of God's people. The first thing is that we need to be together, together praying, together in unity, together in fellowship with one another.

And the second thing that we need to do is that we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. And we need to keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit, just as we need to keep on praying, keep on believing. And thirdly, we need to declare the mighty works of God. That should be what's on our hearts. And if it isn't on our hearts, maybe we need to be filled again with the Holy Spirit and strengthen and renewed so that we can declare God's mighty works to reach the mighty works, to respond in praise and thanksgiving. But there's a fourth thing that we also see here.

[14 : 48] And it's also important. It's not enough for us as Christians to be declaring the mighty works of God. God's people also needs to be heard, heard and understood. In other words, Pentecost or the Bible or church is never just about us. It's never just about those people who are already in church. It's not enough for us to be declaring God's mighty works if no one is listening.

And those international pilgrims on that Pentecost Sunday heard. They heard. Now, at that stage, they were all Jews. Some of them were born Jewish and some of them were proselytes, which means that they were converted to Judaism and they went through all of the rituals in order to become Jews, just like the Ethiopian eunuch that we read about in Acts chapter 8. They were all Jewish, but they lived across the whole world. And those Jewish communities which were already scattered across the world, they became the seedbed in which the church then grew. Whether it was people who'd believed on the day of Pentecost or whether it was simply communities of Jews across the world, those were the places where the Christian church first sprouted and grew and meant to be joined in by people from other nations. Recently, I was in touch with a young lady who's a student, a post graduate student in Edinburgh, and she's from a part of India called Kerala. Maybe some of you know that there's a very old Christian community and almost certainly that Christian community in that part of India goes back to the apostle Thomas. It's just possible it doesn't, but there's every reason to believe that Thomas the apostle went to that place and preached the gospel and the church was born in India in the first century. What I hadn't realised, which this young lady shared with me, is that there was a synagogue in that part of the world. And so when Thomas arrived in South India to preach the gospel in the first century, there was a synagogue to arrive at and that was the basis for the Christian community that exists to this day, the so-called Thomas Christians. And that story was repeated throughout the world. That this event at Pentecost wasn't just a one-off event, this was something that was continued and lots of the places which we're just going to look at now that are mentioned are significant as the story unfolds. The most westerly point mentioned in this list is Rome, which of course is the end of the book of Acts where Paul arrives to preach the gospel. Okay, let's look at this list now in chapter 2 and verses 9 to 11. Now some of these are the names of peoples, some of these are the names of places, but in his coverage Peter really starts in the west and starts to work his way from the Parthian Empire, which we would call Iran, right the way across towards the west and his final point is Rome. And then possibly as an afterthought or for some reason separately he mentions the Cretans and the Arabians who would have been in slightly different places, but there were also representatives on the day of Pentecost.

I haven't been able to put together a full list of languages, but this would have certainly included Parthian, which would be very similar to Farsi, Kurdish, various dialects of Greek, so Greek wasn't spoken in the same way across the world, Latin, Demotic Egyptian, which is probably similar to Coptic, which is a language still spoken by Christians today, and of course Arabic.

And there's another detail here which I think we should draw attention to. Do you notice what they said, the people who were responding to this miracle, they said these words, are not these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear each one of us in his own native language or possibly a better translation would be in his own native dialect? Now what do we know about Galileans and the way they spoke? I don't know if you remember, but when Jesus was being tried, Peter came close to the court and he wanted to sort of be nearby and someone picked up that he must be a Galilean, and the way in which they picked it up is because Galileans had a very strong regional accent. One of the features of Galilean Aramaic or Galilean Hebrew was that they would lisp. So they had a sort of speech defect that would be common among all the people, that was part of their regional dialect. So for example instead of saying shalom, they might have said thalom, or if Peter said the word man, which is ish in Hebrew, he might have said ith. And by picking up this strong regional dialect, they could tell that Peter was one of Jesus' disciples.

So can you see the miracle that God did? That not only were these Galileans speaking people's languages, but they were speaking even their regional dialects correctly. That that was the miracle that God did. It was amazing that these Galileans would be speaking these foreign languages.

[20 : 28] Imagine in your own mind someone with a really strong regional accent speaking perfect foreign languages. And that was what those people experienced on that Sunday. And also notice this nature of the miracle that God did. On Pentecost Sunday, God could have done a different miracle. And here's the different miracle God could have done. All of the 120 could have praised God in their own Aramaic language. And God miraculously could have given the hearers the ability to understand their Aramaic. God could have done that miracle and everyone would have understood. But God chose to do the miracle in a different way. If you like the miracle wasn't a miracle of uniformity, the miracle that God did at Pentecost was a miracle of diversity. And if there's an event in the Bible that this looks very similar to, it's the Tower of Babel. So the events of Pentecost are like the power of Babel backwards. The Tower of Babel was an event in the Old Testament where

God confused the languages of the people and they started to speak different languages and couldn't understand one another. But at Pentecost, God brings the blessing of understanding through this diversity, through his great works being proclaimed in all of these different languages.

We need to remember English isn't in the list. Okay, the closest languages are Greek and Latin to our own language. No one would have imagined at this juncture that in this Germanic dialect that someone might be able to translate the Bible and for God's works to be proclaimed. But we take it for granted. And there are thousands of languages across the world now where the Bible has already been translated where the Gospel is preached. That is the miracle of Pentecost that God did on that first Pentecost Sunday. And he is continuing to this day. I think there's another application for this as we think about how the church needs not just to declare the mighty works of God, but also to be heard. And it also relates to our own setting here in Edinburgh and to English. I'm sure I'm not the only Christian who has the experience that I've told someone the Gospel and they've not understood me. I've said something that's extremely meaningful to me that touches my heart and I believe. But when I say it to someone else, they just don't get what I'm talking about. I've used the language of my Bible translation. I've used my Christian shorthand to explain things, but it just doesn't make sense. And that's been the experience of Christians throughout history. At times, for example, in the first century, when Christians spoke about the resurrection to some of the Greek heroes, that was bad news. Some of them fell about laughing. They thought, that's crazy. You mean you died and you want to go back into your body? And as Christians, we need to know that we're speaking to. And as Christians, we need to not just say the Gospel, but to understand how it sounds in the ears of those we're speaking to. We need to learn the language of the people we're speaking to because the message of Pentecost is, God speaks your language.

In the second century, the Christian thinkers latched onto a really crucial word, which is logos. So the logos is simply word in the Bible when it says in the beginning was the word.

But this was a concept which existed in the Greek thinking of the time. And Christians were able to say, well, when we talk about Jesus Christ, he is that logos that you know. In our own time, we need to relearn how to tell the Gospel in the language and using the words of the people around us. They're changing. We all notice how the words are changing. People are thinking in different concepts and different ideas. And the Christian Gospel has always got across as we have learned to tell people the Gospel in their language, in their understanding, using their words, because it can get across because God speaks our language. And so the four things that we see about God's church, God's people that were true on that day of Pentecost, and we want to be true now in our church here in Edinburgh, are first of all that we want to be together. We want to be united, united in prayer, united in purpose. And we want to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[25 : 05] And having been filled with the Holy Spirit, we want to declare God's mighty works. And as we praise God and give thanks to him, we don't just want to leave it there. We want to be heard. We want the people who speak a different language who otherwise would not understand this for them to hear. And just as on that first Pentecost, on that first Pentecost Sunday, that those who speak to us would be able to give that same testimony. We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty words of God. Amen. Let's pray together. Our Father, we give you thanks and praise for the gift of the Holy Spirit. We give you thanks and praise for the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the salvation that you brought to us through him. We thank you that we can trace back through all the different chain, little links in the chain back to this day when the Christian church wasn't hundreds of millions of people, but it was just 120 people in one room.

And that one dot on the map has now become millions of dots across the globe. And we are this morning, one of them. We pray, Lord, that we would be able to continue that, that we would be able to be filled with your Holy Spirit. And we pray that as we declare your works, that there would be those who wouldn't just be there and watch it, but they would say, yes, we can hear God is speaking our language. So we give you praise, our God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.