

## **MORNING SERVICE**

Sunday 31 May 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*PENTECOST*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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**Before the service** : flute music

**Welcome & Intimations**

**Opening Hymn** : 'Spirit of truth and grace (CH 608)

**Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'It came upon the midnight clear' (CH 303: 1, 2, 5)

**Prayer & Lord's Prayer**

**Readings** : Genesis 11:1-9; John 14:8-9a, 15-17 & Acts 2:1-6 (*Good News Bible*)

**Hymn** : 'Like fireworks in the night' (CH 584)

**Sermon**

*Like fireworks in the night  
the holy Spirit came...*

Of course! Because it is pentecost! So, after this sermon I will ask you to stand, to clap your hands, to dance and sing 'Hallelujah' for at least fifteen minutes. That is what pentecost is about, isn't it?

In my first parish I had a colleague who told in presbytery how he was able to speak in tongues in the middle of his sermon. He was so proud of it, that I could not resist to say that I could too – after a bottle of Scotch.

When we were kids in primary school – which was a truly Reformed school – we told each other this riddle. It's blue and it's flying around in church. What is it? – It's the holy Spirit in a tracksuit.

This is all to say that pentecost tends to be either a mystery, or an embarrassment, but in most cases a problem to us. None of us will probably ever show these seemingly clear 'signs of the Spirit', like dancing and singing through the church, speaking in tongues, performing miraculous healings. And to be honest, we don't really miss these ecstatic expressions of pentecostal zeal either. But then, what does pentecost mean?

Let us go back to the very beginning to find some understanding.

Yesterday and the day before it was the feast of shavu'ot, the Jewish 'pentecost'. It is a meaningful event that the Jewish and the christian feast almost coincide this year.

Indeed they are very different, but the christian pentecost really started on shavu'ot, as we just read in the book of Acts.

Shavu'ot,<sup>1</sup> also known as the 'festival of weeks', originally commemorated that the first fruits were harvested and brought to the Temple. That is why the book of Ruth is still read. But the main theme is the giving of the Torah on Sinai. For, as we know, *man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*<sup>2</sup> By this giving of the Torah the covenant between God and Israel is renewed. First God makes a covenant with Noah – never to flood the earth again<sup>3</sup> – then with Abram – to make a great nation of him<sup>4</sup> – now it is the most decisive moment: through Moses God gives the Torah to Israel<sup>5</sup> – and they receive it, saying they will *do everything and listen to it.*<sup>6</sup>

On shavu'ot this is remembered through extensive and very intense studying of the Torah. All through the night religious Jews will be gathered in the synagogue to do learning, 'lernen'. In Jerusalem just before dawn, they will go through the streets dancing and singing to gather at the Western Wall for morning prayer. Thus they renew the covenant year by year. And this is the background to the story in Acts 2.

Now pentecost in the christian tradition is the feast of the coming of the Spirit, *resting on each one of them.*<sup>7</sup> Pentecost in the first place is a renewal of the covenant. The covenant with Noah and Abram is brought to the foreground: not only Israel, but all people are included. In Jesus, God's Word made flesh, the Torah comes to each and everyone, asking to be done and heard. That is a huge step, and a great commitment and responsibility for all Jesus' followers. From a Jewish point of view it is also highly questionable claim.

If pentecost means that God's Word is now happening to all, it should be said in many different languages. And indeed that is what is happening on that shavu'ot in Jerusalem almost two millenniums ago. It is a wonderful tale, turning the ancient story about the tower of Babel upside down. Then all people got divided and separated, and many were simply unable to hear God's Word. Now, on this very early morning in the streets of Jerusalem, everyone does hear, and understand. The old 'Babbleburgh' disappears to become the City of God and Man again.

Once we realise how big this is – the Torah coming to all people on earth – we will understand that it is *a sound like a mighty rushing wind* that fills the house, bursting out into the streets. Isn't that like the *smoke*, the *thunder*, the *sound of the rams horn*

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<sup>1</sup> For the following I am indebted to G.H. Cohen Stuart, *Joodse feesten en vasten*. Een reis over de zee van de Talmoed naar de wereld van het Nieuwe Testament (Baarn: Ten Have, 2003) p96-123. General information about shavu'ot from a Jewish perspective can be found online at [Judaism 101](#).

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 9:9-11.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 15.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 24.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 24:7.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 2:3.

and the *lightning* on Sinai?<sup>8</sup> Or the *voice of a great rushing* as Ezekiel heard it in his vision of the scroll?<sup>9</sup> Or, paradoxically, even the *sound of silence* in which Elijah encountered God?<sup>10</sup> Ultimately the Hebrew words for spirit or soul – *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshama* – all have the same original meaning: ‘wind’, ‘breath’. Whether it comes with great noise or in deep silence, we need to open our ears to learn about any Word of God.

The *tongues of fire* in the story of pentecost may seem the oddest part of it. No matter how you picture them. But again they refer to words and visions in the Torah. Of course it is about the *mountain burned with fire* at Sinai.<sup>11</sup> But it also points those who listen carefully, towards the end of the Torah, when Moses starts to give his blessing to the people. There a rare, and rather odd, word is used which in the tradition of the rabbis is translated as *a Law given in fire*.<sup>12</sup>

In turn, this has caused Jewish mystics to dig deeper. They taught that the Torah is written in ‘black and white fire’. ‘Black fire’ is the ink of the letters, ‘white fire’ is the parchment on which they are written. The message is that we can only read one of them – that is: the letters – but not without the other. In fact the unreadable ‘white fire’ is the most important, because without it nothing could be written. This, the rabbis continue, means that we have two kind of Torahs, a written one – the letters on the parchment – and a spoken one – the explanation by many generations of teachers and wise –, and the spoken Torah is actually the most important.<sup>13</sup> Reading the bible means reading what is written, but in the same move it requires us to explain, interpret and adapt that to our particular situation. You can never simply look up ‘what the bible says’, you always have to interpret too.

This is exactly what happens with Jesus’ followers. In their night of studying Torah over shavu’ot, they start reading the words in the light of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. All of a sudden they see that God does not only speak in the ‘black fire’ of what is literally written. They start to read *between* the lines, discovering the multitude of ‘white fire’. ‘Peters says, “Do you remember that Jesus said...” John joins in.

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 20:18 – especially the rams horn (‘trumpet’) refers to a strong wind.

<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 3:12 – notice the links with shavu’ot: holy scripture is given as food, it tastes like honey, the great sounds refer to Sinai.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Kings 19:11f – where all known elements of divine revelation come together, but it is the silence that does it.

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 4:11.

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 33:2. The Hebrew word is *eshdat* (אֶשְׁדָּת) and it only appears once in the whole of the Hebrew bible. The rabbinic tradition reads it as two words, *esh* (‘fire’) and *dat* (‘law’). The Septuaginta, the Greek translation of the Torah (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), transforms it into ‘and his angels with him’, but the Vulgata, the Latin translation of the bible (4<sup>th</sup> century CE), has *ignea lex*, and likewise, but possibly informed by Jewish scholars, the King James Version, in accordance with the Dutch Statenvertaling and the German Luther Bibel, translates ‘fiery law’. Although in many modern translations many creative alternatives have been introduced, I would say that the testimony of the rabbinic reading, combined with that of ancient and older translations, suffices.

<sup>13</sup> Another traditional argument is found in Leviticus 26:46 where the ‘decrees’ and the ‘judgements’ are seen as referring to the midrashim (‘study’) and the halakhah (‘the path to follow’). The ‘Laws’ – plural! – are explained as representing the written and the spoken Torah.

Andrew supports. Matthew adds. Thomas remembers yet another detail.”<sup>14</sup> That is what happened. Holy Spirit, ‘white fire’ all around. That is how the Word of God comes alive.

All right, now we have arrived at the high plains of mysticism. Time to descend to where we live: two feet on the ground. Where could the holy Spirit be at work?

One of our professors, actually a pretty calvinistic one, once said that the holy Spirit can be compared to Johan Crujff, the football player. He dribbles around anyone, and arrives exactly where he wants to be.<sup>15</sup> A spirit of fair play is a good spirit indeed.

An American psychotherapist wrote a whole book to explain how important and unique an entry sexuality is if one wants to nurture spiritual life. That is, of course, once we have found the true spirit, beyond all the explicit stuff the media have on offer.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes we meet a complete stranger, and before we realise it, we are talking to each other’s heart. Just like that barriers go down and mutual understanding and acceptance come in. It happens in Kintyre and it is spiritual.

In times when we are reminded day by day that an economic crisis is going on, greater than most of us can remember, there are still people who dare to speak as prophets. They speak on behalf of the poor, the powerless, those who are simply dumped by the powers that be. Not only do they speak, but they act as well. They are the voices, hands and feet of the holy Spirit.

If we look at our own lives, we may find that from time to time we do more than the usual. We seriously care for others, we dare to make changes, or to take up a challenge. Behind it there is a Spirit.

In all of these things there is something of holy Spirit. She is there as guidance, support, comfort, encouragement, wisdom, courage. And her single purpose is to bring forth the good life that God includes in creation since the very beginning. Working silently, often unrecognised, the holy Spirit helps us to tear down our towers of Babel and restore open communication. She makes us deal with and leave behind the feelings of guilt that block us. She shows us how love erases hate and how our brokenness can be healed.

Actually, if you think about it, there is a whole lot of holy Spirit all around us. So maybe we should more often say ‘Hallelujah’ – or even sing it. Just silently.

*Like fireworks in the night  
the holy Spirit came...*

Indeed! Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Cohen Stuart, *Joodse feesten en vasten*, p103.

<sup>15</sup> A.A. van Ruler (1908-1970), quoted in [Wikipedia](#).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Moore, *The Soul Of Sex. Cultivating Life as an Act of Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

**Hymn** : 'Loving Spirit' (CH 597)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

**Closing Hymn** : 'O Day of joy and wonder' (CH 582)

**Blessing**