

## Pentecost Sunday

*Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, Day of Pentecost, 19 May 2024*  
*Acts 2:1–21; Psalm 104:26–36; Romans 8: 22–27; John 15:26–27, 16: 4b–15*

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When I was a child and even a teenager my concept of God was very concrete – quite black and white – fitting the view of God that my parents had taught me. Looking back now, I realise that my childlike faith was not necessarily wrong, but now as an adult I know there is far more I don't fully understand about God than what I do, and that certainly, there is a great mystery in God which defies simple description. There is great mystery in the Holy Spirit that we celebrate today.

Let me start by commending to you one of my favourite children's stories about the Holy Spirit. It's called *The Windy Day*, a Teddy Horsley story by Leslie J Francis and Nicola M Slee.<sup>1</sup>

It concerns Teddy Horsley, a bear, who looks out on a windy day and is puzzled by how strange a thing the wind is. Watching leaves being blown about, a boat sailing on a lake and a kite in the sky, he realises that you can't see the wind, but you can see what it does.

Hearing the wind rattling bins, blowing doors shut and whistling through the trees, and feeling it ruffling his fur, he begins to understand that although you can't see or catch the wind, you know it's there all around you.

On Pentecost Sunday, Teddy's family takes him to church, something he looks forward to because he knows it's about the Holy Spirit and this is something he wants to see.

Again, he's puzzled when he looks everywhere in the church and can't see the Holy Spirit. But then he notices people smiling, singing, and acting kindly towards each other, comforting those who are sad.

He recognises that although he can't see the Holy Spirit, he knows it's there, making him feel safe and loved.

'Hmmm', he thinks, 'You can't see the Holy Spirit, just like you can't see the wind, but you sure can see what the Holy Spirit does in the lives of people.'

Jesus used the image of the wind when speaking with Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 about being "born of the Spirit".

In that conversation, Jesus said:

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

The great mystery is that we have no idea exactly where the wind begins or where it ends. We can't see the wind, but we can see what it does. So it is, Jesus said, with those who are born of Spirit. The birth is mysterious. Often it just happens, we know not why.

There was similar mystery on the Day of Pentecost. Something like the sound of a violent wind was heard – yet there was no wind. Something like tongues of fire were seen on the disciples' heads, yet they were not burned. How did this happen? What did it mean? One thing is certain. Just as we know the wind is blowing when we see trees move in its wake, so the disciples knew that the Holy Spirit was filling them because they were emboldened after fifty days of living in fear, and because they were able to speak out the praises of God in earthly languages that were not their own. How mysterious is that?

The Scriptures make it clear that this day was a pivotal point for the young Church. It was the day when Jesus' promise of power from above was realised for them. This day changed the course of human history.

However, the Day of Pentecost was not the first time the action of the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the Scriptures. Far from it! We are told in Genesis Chapter 1 that the Spirit of God moved over the face of the deep in the mysterious time of creation. From that point, right through the Old and New Testaments, we read about the Spirit being active in the world.

The angel who appeared to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, told him that “even before his birth he [John] will be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Luke 1: 15)

In Matthew's gospel we read that Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1: 18)

And in John Chapter 20 we read of one of the resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples on the Sunday he rose from the dead. We read that Jesus

breathed on [the disciples] and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20: 22)

And this happened fifty days before the Day of Pentecost!

Throughout Scripture we see that when people were filled with the Holy Spirit, they were given an initial endowment of the Spirit to fit them for God's service or to speak in God's name. Clearly, a person already filled with the Spirit can receive a fresh filling for a specific task, and this may happen on many occasions.

In a special way on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and so were enabled to perform the tasks of evangelism and proclamation of the Gospel that Jesus had given them.

John writes that Jesus said to his disciples:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (John 14: 15–17)

We show our love for Jesus by keeping his commandments. In response, Jesus promised to send another ‘Advocate’ or ‘Helper’ to be with us forever – the Spirit of truth who both abides with us and lives in us.

When we receive the Holy Spirit at our conversion we receive the Spirit of truth, the Spirit who advocates for us, comforts us, teaches us, and guides us. And as Paul stated in our epistle reading from Romans Chapter 8, it is this Spirit of God who helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

When I look back on my life – its good times and not so good, its highs and lows, its laughter, and sorrows – I see the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in my life and the lives of others. I see and rejoice in the giftedness of those Christians around me.

There was no rushing wind nor tongues of fire when I first truly gave my life to Jesus, but I do know beyond a doubt that at that time God’s Spirit filled me. I was 13 years old and at a Christian camp where the campers were encouraged to pray for their non-Christian friends. I suspect because I thought it was expected of me, I got on my knees and started praying for a friend, but then began to doubt whether I truly had faith myself. I remember praying “God I want to believe in you, help me to me believe in you”. I prayed this over and over (others told me afterwards that I had been praying for over an hour although it didn’t seem like it at the time). Just as the disciples were filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, so I remember that as I got off my knees I felt totally filled up with love. I felt I was floating on cloud nine and I knew that God is. It was from that moment in my life that I became an evangelist. Although I was only in Year 8, I returned to my school and over the next few years was instrumental in leading several of my friends to faith in the Lord Jesus – one of whom later became a priest too. This had been my ‘Pentecost’ experience.

Since then, my life has had its ups and downs, its times of glory and times of deep sorrow and challenge. Looking back at those times, I now see that on many occasions, the Spirit has been my advocate and guide. In my darkest hours it was God’s Spirit who comforted me, prayed for me, and guided me to a brighter place, the most recent time being during lockdown in late 2020 and much of 2021 when I

was mentally and spiritually unwell and exhausted. Through these times it has been the Holy Spirit who has comforted, guided, and remained alongside me, healed me, and has brought me to the green pastures God promises for those who put their trust in him.

I commend our God who is Spirit and love to you all.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Windy Day* was written by the Reverend Canon Leslie J Francis and Nicola M Slee and is published by the Bible Society in multiple editions, variously illustrated.