

Purpose & Oneness

In May 2006, I sat in an old stone chapel with pilgrims from all over the world in Rabanal, north-western Spain, on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela trail. We were there for a 9pm pilgrim mass, on the eve of our ascent of the mountain dividing the dry Castilian plains from the moist, rolling hills of Celtic Galicia. The chapel had a basic altar & font, twinkling candles illuminating the space, & an alarmingly extensive crack in its centuries-old grey stone wall! A young Benedictine monk took the benediction service to bless us, in preparation for our 1000m spiralling entry into the Galician town of O Cebreiro. Sitting attentively around in faithful silence were pilgrims assembled from all over the world. We were all in this place for a **single purpose**. We were acknowledging before God our walking or cycling of the Camino to the fabled resting place of the Apostle James in this corner of Europe, near the edge of the vast Atlantic Ocean. We spoke the separate tongues of the world, but were **united together** in an unspoken yet profound way. The chapel's space expanded with its almost tangible silent presence.

Pentecost

God sends us his Spirit to befriend and help us, recreate and guide us, Spirit friend: Spirit who enlivens, sanctifies, enlightens, sets us free, is now our Spirit friend. (TIS, 412, v.1)

Pentecost is the festival in the church calendar, as Olaf mentioned last week, 50 days after Easter. It marks the transition of early followers of Jesus following from:

- The trauma & grief of their experience of Jesus' death
- The confusion & growing awareness of his resurrected presence as Jesus, the Christ, in their midst, &
- Christ's departure to be with his Heavenly Father.

Fire of God's Spirit

They become animated by a strong sense of God's Spirit empowering them to continue God's mission in the world – a mission that has been handed to them by Christ:

'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, & it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, & a tongue rested on each of them.' (Acts 2:1-3)

This passage from the Book of Acts is written by Luke. While the Gospel of Luke is his account of the mission of Jesus, Acts is a follow-up to his Gospel that describes the mission of the apostles. Just as the Christmas stories at the start of Luke's Gospel tell of the birth of Jesus, this story - located near the start of Acts - tells of the birth of the church. In it, fire imagery represents the powerful presence of God's Spirit lighting up the followers of Jesus with a sense of mission & purpose.

Connection & Oneness

'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit & began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered & was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed & astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ... in our own languages we hear them speaking about

God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed & perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"
¹³ But others sneered & said, "They are filled with new wine." ' (Acts 2:4-8; 11b-13)

Jews are assembled in Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean world for the annual festival of Pentecost. They each speak the native language of their homelands & have come in pilgrimage to the holy city at the centre of their Jewish faith.

Suddenly, these faithful Jews, **previously divided** by different languages of their homelands & ethnic backgrounds, each hear the message of Christ in their own tongue. They're **unified** in a common experience of the power of the Risen Christ, through the presence of God's Spirit. They're bewildered. Then, the apostle Peter stands up & speaks. Peter explains that their Jewish prophets have described experiences of the Spirit of God's power centuries before. He tells them that about Jesus, a descendant of their greatest king, David, & Jesus' ministry of love, forgiveness & healing; death at the hands of the Roman State; & his raising up by God. They respond enthusiastically, seeking to follow this risen Jesus. They're baptised into this faith.

*Now, with the mind of Christ set us on fire, that unity may be our great desire:
Give joy & peace; give faith to hear your call, & readiness in each to work for all.
Widen our love, good Spirit, to embrace in your strong care all those of every race:
Like wind & fire with love among us move til we are known as Christ's & Christians prove.*
(TiS, 411, v.2& 3)

Our Sense of Purpose & Becoming One

When we come together in worship, we experience the fire of God's Spirit that lights up our life with **purpose**. The shape of this purpose looks different for each one of us. We might generalise this by saying that our mission is to be the **light of Christ** in the world.

We assemble here as the body of Christ - the church. We acknowledge ourselves as part of the church, in all its frailty, as a sometimes-brittle container for the priceless gift of God's Spirit to us. We experience restoration from the things have divided us from ourselves & from each other. We experience a sense of **becoming one**, despite the different 'languages' we speak - our varying backgrounds, beliefs & personalities.

Neuroscience studies show that singing together triggers brain pathways that make us feel connection with each other, & with something larger than ourselves. When we raise our voices together to God in worship, celebrating the Crucified and Risen Jesus, we connect with ourselves, each other, the wider world & God. We connect in compassion for the needs of people in our disconnected world.

We bring our whole lives to God - whatever that is looking like at the time in its sorrows & peaks, restlessness & contentment, confusion & clarity. We offer repentance & are reminded of God's gift of forgiveness. We may experience the releasing of grief & the things weigh us down, & have them replaced with a sense of empowerment, joy, unity & peace. We receive & offer each other food & drink for the journey. In the company of the Communion of Saints, we hold on to a vision of a world transformed by God's love.

We go out into the world restored, reconnected to our purpose & our oneness with each other. We take with us the profound sense that we're being taken into the heart of God, in this life & the life to come.

Blessing

May you experience anew in today's worship a fire that lights up your life with purpose; May you know a deep connection making you at one with yourself; each other; the world in its diverse colours & needs; & with God, who is the source & destiny of you life. Amen.