

Sermon on Sunday 23 May 2021

by Geoff Mutch, Lay Reader

Reading: Acts 2. 1-21

Acts 2 v 2. 'Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit....'

'A sound like the rush of a violent wind'. The story of Pentecost is about a new kind of Power, and St. Luke is not the first person to speak of God's Spirit as being like the wind. The first verses of Genesis tell of God's spirit moving like a wind over the formless oceans at the very beginning of creation. The ancient Hebrew word 'Ruah' is used in the Old Testament to mean wind, and breath, and spirit.

I was brought up on boys' adventure stories about Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh and James Cook. I often wonder what Luke's description of that first Pentecost would have meant to seafarers in the age before we invented the steamship.

For all the sailors, the explorers, the traders and adventurers who crossed the uncharted oceans in the age of sail, their chief daily concern, the key factor in all their triumphs and disasters, was the wind.

They had no timetables. 'Setting sail', now just a figure of speech for 'setting off', meant the arduous task of unfurling the vast expanse of sailcloth that would harness the wind. A journey began when the wind was blowing the right way. The journey back had to wait until the wind had turned. Today, tomorrow, next week, next month... If the wind dropped as they were sailing, they stopped and waited – for as long as it took. If the wind changed and took them off course, well, they arrived... wherever they arrived. If the wind became too strong and turbulent, they might never arrive at all.

But that was a chance they had to take. The wind was everything. For generations, sailors put themselves into the hands of a power **they could not control**, knowing that there was no other way to get where they wanted to go.

You didn't have to be a sailor to appreciate the power of wind. The remains of sturdy windmills still dot our landscapes. Here and there you can find a working one and see how wind

power was once harnessed to meet our most basic needs, to grind the flour to bake our bread. But you could only use the mill if the wind was blowing. If it wasn't, no corn could be ground, and you sat and waited. In the age of wind power, you learned to be patient.

Then times changed and we discovered power sources which we could control. Coal and steam, and later oil and gas and electricity. This is great, we said. Power sources that we **could** turn on and off whenever we wanted. The industrial world needed to be in control of its power supplies. Its transport had to run to timetable. Its mills had to work to shift patterns and deliver to deadlines. We didn't do patience anymore. And the great sailing ships disappeared from our seas, our windmills became historical curiosities.

But what's happening now? Windmills are back again. Not grinding corn, but generating electricity. We have realised that the burning of coal, oil and gas has all sorts of side effects that are, after all, beyond our control, and that the supply of them is not as limitless as we once thought. Wind power, for all its unpredictability, is once again an important part of global energy policy. The power of the wind didn't go

away – we just thought for a while that we could manage without it.

Have you spotted the parable here? The Wind, or the Spirit of God, the power God offers to our lives, hasn't gone away either. It's just that most people try to manage without it. We like to be in control of our lives. To set our own timetables and shift patterns. To know where we're going. To do what we want, when we want. To do it our way. Well, the Holy Spirit doesn't offer us that!

The dramatic events of that first Pentecost, and the breathtaking, miraculous and often dangerous tale of the life of the early Church, can make us a little nervous when we think of the Holy Spirit. We fear the rushing violent wind; the kind of transformation in our lives, or in our world, that seems like a hurricane or a tornado. Well, perhaps now and again we do need a hurricane through our lives, blowing down the rickety structures behind which we hide from our God.

We may all have felt that for the last 15 months our world has been stuck in harbour, waiting anxiously to resume our journey. Perhaps the world, as it yearns to move forward

from all the pain and struggle of the pandemic, does need to be swept forward on powerful new Winds of Change.

But there is more to the Holy Spirit than that. It's not the gales and storms, it's the regular, daily breeze that I can best liken to the Spirit that I know.

So, to keep to the seafaring imagery, we need to **unfurl our sails**, and let the Holy Spirit fill them. Unfurl our sails, not in the expectation that God will send a new Day of Pentecost upon us – though He might do, you never know, if that's really what's right for us – but rather trusting that He will give us a fair breeze to take us wherever each day needs us to get to, will give us times of calm when we need to rest, and maybe now and again a bit of a gale to give us a good start on the bigger tasks we face in life.

His power is there for us, and not just as a last resort, as a resource we forget about until we realise that everything else is running out. We may believe that we have enough resources of our own to get us where we want to go, but in time we will learn that our spiritual tanks run empty without Him.

Like sailors of old, let us trust ourselves to a **power we cannot control**, a power that may not be predictable, but is eternally sustainable, knowing that only the Holy Spirit's power can safely take us, not where we want to go, but where He needs us to go.

