

**What Does This Mean? (Acts 2. 1-12)**

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‘What does this mean?’ they all asked, amazed and perplexed.

It is Pentecost, a defining day in the life of the early church.<sup>1</sup> It has its roots in the Jewish tradition, where the Festival of Weeks or Shavuot, a harvest festival that also commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mt Sinai falls fifty days after Passover, for us, fifty days after Easter.

Jan Richardson writes:

‘Acts 2.1-21 tells us it is on this festival day that the followers of Jesus are “all together in one place” when the Spirit appears. It arrives as a rushing wind, filling them, in-spiring them, causing them to draw breath and speak.’ You probably know that the word for spirit in Greek and Hebrew is the same as that for breath or wind.

‘Along with the wind comes fire, a symbol that stirs our collective memory of the God whose transforming presence has so often been marked by flames. Think of Moses and the burning bush, the column of fire that led the people of Israel through the wilderness, the temple fire that consumed the sacrificial offerings. “For the Lord your God is a devouring fire,” Deuteronomy 4.24 tells us.. the fires of Pentecost are not the tame flames of birthday candles or a cozy winter’s hearth; the fires of Pentecost are a sign of the God who resists our every attempt to domesticate the divine and to control how the holy will work..The disciples here are no longer a group of believers but rather a catalyzed community, a body that, enlivened by the Spirit, will endure and continue the work of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/05/05/pentecost-fire-and-breath/>

'The outpouring of the Spirit upon the whole community reminds us that we are not on an individual journey but a shared one. God calls us, compels us, to attend to the Spirit in one another.

The celebration of Pentecost beckons us to keep breathing, ..to keep ourselves open to the Spirit who seeks us. The Spirit that, in the beginning, brooded over the chaos and brought forth creation; that herded Jesus into the desert, the Spirit that drenched the community with fire and breath on the day of Pentecost: this same Spirit desires to dwell within us and among us. Amidst the brokenness and chaos and pain that sometimes come with being in community, the Spirit searches for places to breathe in us, to transform us, to knit us together more deeply and wholly as the body of Christ, and to send us forth into the world.

..May we keep breathing. May we blaze'<sup>2</sup>

What struck me in the reading from Acts this time is the fact that people heard each in their own language. Christine Valters Paintner says:

'We are reminded that practicing resurrection is not for ourselves alone, but is for the benefit of a wider community; not only for those with whom we attend church services, but beyond to the ones who sit at the furthest margins of our awareness. Pentecost is a story of the courage that comes from breaking established boundaries'.<sup>3</sup>

Like our retreat in daily life which ends tomorrow, Pentecost was both an individual (Acts 2:3 'a tongue of fire rested on each of them') and a communal experience.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/05/05/pentecost-fire-and-breath/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/pilgrimage-of-resurrection-christine-valters-paintner-05-20-2015?p=2>

Yet, for many of us, the transformation journeys are slow, and arduous with moments only of light, flashes of recognition. Pentecost is an embodied experience, for them and for us. There is grieving, pain, loss, anger, and then, sometimes a slow dawning, light, fire, passion, movement.

The Retreat in Daily Life is a retreat where 15 retreatants almost all from Benedictus, and seven spiritual directors or companions have been walking a transformation journey, and isn't this what Pentecost is about, and reconciliation week, transformation, change.

Let me tell you a little of our five week Retreat in Daily Life.

We began just after Easter, listening to the transformation journey in the psychological, the Christian and the ecological traditions, from material collated by Sue Dunbar.

Ronald Rolheiser, in his book, *The Holy Longing*. (p147-148) presents his understanding of the process of transformation using the events of Easter. He names "five clear moments in the paschal cycle, and Sue Dunbar adds another, Holy Saturday. The journey is described thus:

Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, the forty days leading up to the Ascension, the Ascension and Pentecost."<sup>4</sup> Rolheiser diagrams his understanding as:

Good Friday - loss of life, real death - "name your deaths"

Holy Saturday – this is the time of waiting, everything is dead, the "not yet" time, sometimes it's the period of loss of hope, nothing makes sense any more.

Easter Day - reception of new life - "claim your births"

Forty Days - "Grieve what you have lost and adjust to the new reality"

Ascension - "Don't cling to the old, let it ascend and give you its blessing"

Pentecost - "Accept the spirit of the life that you are, in fact, living"

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing, The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999) p147

I wonder if you recognise these elements in your transformation journey?

On the Retreat in Daily Life, 22 of us walked together. Some have never been on retreat before, never spoken with a spiritual director. Some have not had the opportunity of reflecting on the spiritual life. We have all immersed ourselves in it these past five weeks, and our lives have changed, our understanding has expanded. We have grown. We continue to live ordinary unique special lives but God is more deeply embedded, or recognised somehow. Spirit is moving.

I experience this Holy Spirit when I am doing what I am called to do. When I am working in spiritual direction I listen, I listen for the more, I listen to where the spark is, where the divine is moving in someone's life, and there are moments when I see the light shine in a person. I experience it when I preside at the Eucharist, look out and experience such love for you. And engaging in social action, sponsoring a refugee family. And I know it when I dance.

I have also met it in walking the labyrinth..

I wonder, what is being kindled in you, what is the flicker within you, within us as a community that needs to be stoked?

Someone said that the connection between wind and fire at Pentecost is that when you light a fire you need lots of space, you need breathe or wind for the fire to grow. So, at Pentecost we realise again that God is on the loose and not tied down in any box not restricted by religion or culture God is on the loose and in our lives. And our task is to allow spirit to blow, to kindle, so we are enabled to live our passion, our particular calling for the good of the world.

*Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire and lighten with celestial fire..  
thou the anointing Spirit art,  
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.*

But it is not all brightness and movement and light. Sometimes spirit comes from our contemplative hearts. I remember a time praying for someone in hospital and having a great sense of light.

I remember another time speaking with the mother of some tiny premature babies and having a vision of angels, the problem was I didn't know whether angels meant they were going to die or they were going to leave. They lived!

I remember a time in a cave in the Blue Mountains having a deep sense of presence of the ancestors. It was deeply moving and I had no words to say afterwards. There was connection. Another time I was at Robe in South Australia by the Ocean and had an amazing experience of the rhythm of the birthing ocean. I asked my friend for a blessing, but he did not understand and would not give it. It was a mystical experience of something more.

I could go on and on, and you might be able to talk of many other encounters with holy spirit, of God's presence empowering and opening you to understand others or others to understand you, times of connection.

A new beginning, but not disconnected to the past and your beginning.

Community, deep connection, understanding in and beyond words. That is Pentecost.

Here is a poem I read last night at meditation. It is from [Oodgeroo Noonuccal](#) written a while ago now, which speaks to reconciliation, to the spirit of Pentecost, and the transformation journey – 'Son of mine (TO DENIS)'.

My son, your troubled eyes search mine,  
Puzzled and hurt by colour line.  
Your black skin as soft as velvet shine;  
What can I tell you, son of mine?

I could tell you of heartbreak, hatred blind,  
I could tell you of crimes that shame mankind,  
Of brutal wrong and deeds malign,  
Of rape and murder, son of mine;

But I'll tell you instead of brave and fine  
When lives of black and white entwine,  
And men in brotherhood combine-  
This would I tell you, son of mine.

So what does all this mean for us?

Sarah Bachelard (2019) says:

'The gift of the Holy Spirit is .. **is very particularly to enable our participation in Jesus 'communion with the Father, to be more fully caught up in it and become capable of reflecting in our lives the love between them which is continuously poured out towards and received from the other.**

And what we need to recognise is that in a world that's fearful and defended and clings to identity on its own terms; that too often prefers to deny solidarity than change its destructive ways; in a world that would rather rely on habits of violence and control, than take a risk to be reconciled and forgiven, this is a risky way to be. Jesus came to make visible the self-giving love of God in the midst of the world's confusion and violence, and was cast out, crucified; but God's love cannot be extinguished and [God] comes again and again with the same offer of **liberation and life**. To receive the gift of [God's] Spirit, to allow it to be breathed in us, is to consent to share and bear this same vocation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://benedictus.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/I-Am-Going-Away-and-I-Am-Coming-to-You-080619.pdf>