

Sermon for Sunday 23rd May 2021, Pentecost
by the Revd Andrew Hurst
Acts 2: 1-21, John 15: 26-27, 16:4b-15

A promise is a gift. Perhaps that is why a promise is so precious, because a promise is a gift. That is why one of the biggest reproaches we can have, one to another, is to say, "*But you promised!*" There is the promise of the Romantic date, and being humiliatingly "stood up", waiting vainly for over an hour and realising she isn't coming; there is the promise to love for ever that is shattered by unfaithfulness, and the promise unkept by circumstances beyond our control.

These past few many months of Pandemic we have had plenty of unkept promises; and we can be forgiven if we are cynical at the politicians' blithe and easy, expansive promises of what will be will be over much of the years of our recent national debates. The false promise is the stock in trade, perhaps made with a knowing private chortle. Human promises can be weak and frail things.

We expect that promises made are to be kept. We do not expect the same of dreams. Sometimes we dream such sweet dreams we don't want to wake up, or like Caliban in *The Tempest*: "*In dreaming, the clouds methought would open and show riches / Ready to drop upon me; that when I waked / I cried to dream again.*" (Frankly, right now, all we are dreaming of is for it to stop raining, for the sun to come out and May to buck up and jolly well be a bit more Merry.)

So, promises and dreams, the expectations and the longings that are mixed up in the peculiar business of being human.

Last week, as we celebrated the Ascension, we heard of Jesus' promise to his disciples to wait in Jerusalem "*for the promise of the Father .. that you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit*" [Acts 1: 4-5]. This week we celebrate the fulfilment of that promise at Pentecost.

Pentecost is the Jewish festival commemorating the giving of the Law by Moses. This explains why in our reading from Acts there are so many people from all over the Mediterranean world from the Jewish diaspora in Jerusalem. This is what gives us the great Grand National of pronunciation for whoever is reading this famous passage - the Elamites and the people of Cappadocia and Phrygia to name but three of the linguistic fences to hurdle.

So there they all are - all the people of all the world - and there are the disciples gathered in one place - and the stage is set for the most extraordinary encounter that is the fulfilment of Jesus' promise. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind that filled the entire house, and there were tongues as of fire resting upon each one where they were sitting; and the disciples break out into all the languages of all the world and the crowd gathers - amazed, astonished and wondering if they are drunk. I'm not sure why new-found linguistic proficiency should be equated with intoxication (its never worked for me on holiday abroad, perhaps I should try harder next time) - but that is the accusation.

This wind - associated with the Spirit, this fire associated with judgement - is cleansing, a baptism indeed of the elemental opposite to water, just as Jesus promised.

And Peter explains to the crowd. He quotes the Prophet Joel who is speaking of the last days, the end-time. Peter tells the crowd that this is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel. Just before this passage in Joel, the Prophet speaks of God's pity for his people, how he restores their pastures and rich harvests of oil and grain. Joel then comes to these beautiful words of promise that Peter quotes to the crowd: that God will pour out his spirit on all flesh, that the sons and daughters will prophesy and your old men shall dream dreams .. in those days I will pour out my spirit.

This is the galvanisation of the younger, and the deep wisdom of the elder. These are the promises and dreams of the peculiar business of being in a relationship with God.

And what is it that we dream, of our relationship with God? Sometimes we can read the Bible, or hear of other people's stories of encounters with God, and feel inadequate. The encounter with God through fire and spirit is a form of theophany - a transient experience of God in visible form. We could dream a hundred dreams of meeting Christ face to face, or being consumed with un-touching fire. At the very end of the television series "Rev", the very dispirited Priest (whose name is Adam) climbs a hill in his inner city south London Parish alone, carrying a cross, and tries to console himself by singing softly the Lord of the Dance, and shuffling about self-consciously, until a man (played by Liam Nelson) is dancing with him. This character would appear to be homeless, a rough sleeper, poorly dressed, but who joins in the dance with vigour. Then, to the Priest's surprise, he addresses him tenderly by name, "*Adam, Adam*", and then tells Adam that we all have our crosses to bear, but that He will always be with him. And then He is gone. Adam knows what has happened. He has encountered God.

It is an incredibly tender scene - but it is a television programme, a drama: it is, for us, a dream, a sweet dream.

In our reading from John's Gospel, presaging the events of Pentecost, Jesus is saying goodbye. Jesus knows that the disciples are sad. He promises them that the Holy Spirit will be sent to them and then tells them what he could not say to them earlier. He can now only speak to them as he does because he is leaving them. He tells them in effect of why he must leave them - which is an enormous theological question in itself. The answer is simple, that Jesus needs to go so that the Holy Spirit will come to the Disciples, and in so doing **the world** will know through the Holy Spirit **worked**

out in the life and faith of ordinary, frail humans like you and me the truth about living with God. All of this, this passing on of responsibility for the life and work of God in the world had been too much for the disciples to bear too soon - like strong wine for the unready constitution; even now there is yet too much to say, but the time will come, Jesus promises.

So at Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, we see the fulfilment of who we are, and what we are for, in our relationship with God; if Jesus stayed indefinitely with the disciples we would follow not lead; we would be safe but unfulfilled; we would be cosy but immature, learn but not understand. There comes a time when we have to leave: to grow ourselves, and nurture others in turn. It is time to fly, to run, to walk, to sing for God ourselves, not just follow enthralled; it is time to speak for God ourselves, to live for God ourselves, to love for God ourselves, to grow into God ourselves.

But we cannot do it alone. So the promise is fulfilled: the Holy Spirit is poured out on all of us, to embolden, empower, encourage and enlighten.

So we might dream of a hilltop dance with God; we might dream of tongues of fire - but we know that we shall be unlikely to encounter God in such a dramatic way. But we do encounter God in more ways than we know at the time - it can be, on reflection, that the right words were said at the right time, or the person who appeared who might just have been an angel in disguise, or what seemed so wrong strangely turns out to have been so right; or a hidden hand wiped away our tears or held us close - or simply smiled.

Pentecost, in the giving of the Holy Spirit to all of us for all of us, is the unbroken, fulfilled promise of the dream come true. It is not the end time, but the end of an old time. For this promise is fulfilled, and the dream has come true, that wherever, whatever, whoever, however, God is with us, to the end of the age. *Amen*