

Poole Bay Methodist Circuit worship

Sunday 5th May 2024

“What’s the Holy Spirit up to now?” - Led by Dr Julian Tawn

This service can be found on my YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/r0RCYHrpdz8>

This is getting to be a habit! Yes, it’s Julian Tawn leading worship for Sunday 5th May 2024. Today we will be reflecting on the movement of the Holy Spirit in the early Church.

So let us join together again in worshipping God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Come into God’s presence.
Leave behind worries. Leave behind cares.
Leave behind prejudice and preference.
Come to God, who accepts all,
who receives all and who loves all.
Come and worship our surprising God.

God of surprises,
we come as we are but wanting to be more like Jesus.
Journey with us as we seek to be surprised by you today.
As we challenge ourselves to respond to your surprising love,
give us grace to welcome others into your kingdom.

Amen.

Our first hymn this morning is a hymn of praise, number **106** in Singing the Faith, “God, whose almighty word”. As usual for me, there is an organ accompaniment on the video and audio files, and a YouTube link on the sheet for those who can use it. The words are slightly different in this version.

The music and words can also be found here: [YouTube Link](#)

God, whose almighty Word
Chaos and darkness heard,
And took their flight;
Hear us, we humbly pray,
And, where the Gospel day
Sheds not its glorious ray,
Let there be light!

Christ, you have come to bring
On your redeeming wing
Healing and sight,
Health to the sick in mind,
Sight to the inly blind,
O, to all humankind,
Let there be light!

Spirit of truth and love,
Life giving, holy Dove,
Speed forth your flight;
Move on the water's face
Bearing the lamp of grace,
And, in earth's darkest place,
Let there be light!

Blessèd and holy Three,
Glorious Trinity,
Wisdom, love, might!
Boundless as ocean's tide,
Rolling in fullest pride,
Through the world far and wide,
Let there be light!

Opening Prayers

Lord God, you bless us with your holy presence and your almighty power when we least expect them.
You challenge us to respond to you. You push us beyond our limits.
Here we are in your house, ready to hear your Word:
Ready to do your will:
Ready to share your love with our neighbours, whoever they may be, whether we like them or not:
Ready to have our hearts opened, our minds stretched:
Bless us, good Lord, beyond our wildest expectations.
Amen.

Amazing God, who created every language,
who knows our every question before we even think it,
who understands not only our words,
but the thoughts, hopes, dreams and fears behind them.
You hear the loudest cry and the smallest sigh.
We are blown away by your love.
We long to share it, especially with those
who think they are beyond the limits.
Amen.

Lord God, sometimes even though the evidence of you
is staring us in the face, battering our eardrums,
we still deliberately close our minds.
Forgive us, and challenge us, good Lord.
We come into your presence, sometimes we question whether
others are accepted by you, and whether we are ourselves.
We might have too little self-esteem, or too much self-importance.
Forgive us, and challenge us, good Lord.
Sometimes we just don’t want to walk in your light.
We see what we want to see, not what you would have us see.
We block out what is right before our eyes.
Our hearts are ice and we don’t feel the all-consuming heat of your spirit.
Forgive us, and challenge us, good Lord.

Our gracious, all-encompassing God,
you know no boundaries, no limits.
Come to us and accept our confession.
Open the door to your glorious light and life.
You carry complete forgiveness and healing in your wings.
We thankfully and humbly receive you now, Lord God.
Amen.

We thank you, Lord, that if we are truly open to you,
you fill us with your spirit.
You surprise us with your joy and power.

We are ready to accept your challenge,
and to live our lives open to you,
with hearts full of praise and thanksgiving.
Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. **Amen.**

Our reading for today is taken from the book of Acts 10:44-48. As this reading is quite short, I will read 2 versions, first the NIVUK and then the Message.

Reading

NIVUK

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ ‘Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Message

⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ No sooner were these words out of Peter’s mouth than the Holy Spirit came on the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on “outsider” non-Jews, but there it was—they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God.

⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ Then Peter said, “Do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They’ve received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did.” Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they asked Peter to stay on for a few days.

Okay, I think it’s time to sing again. Our next hymn is. “Breathe on me, breath of God”, which is number **370** in Singing the Faith. The organ accompaniment is on the audio and video files, and there is a YouTube link on the sheet.

The music and words can also be found here: [YouTube Link](#)

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Blend all my soul with Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glow with Thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
So shall I never die,
But live with Thee the perfect life
Of Thine eternity.

Let us Pray:

Now may the words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Amen

Reflection

Our scripture reading today from the book of Acts comes at the end of a dramatic series of events, so I need to give you the backstory.

At the beginning of Acts chapter 10, we meet Cornelius, a devout and prayerful Gentile – a non-Jew. Cornelius has a vision in which an angel tells him to send some of his men to find a man called Peter and bring him to Cornelius.

Meanwhile, Peter – the primary leader of the new Jesus movement – is having a vision of his own. While he is waiting for lunch, he sees the heavens open and a big sheet float down, filled with all kinds of animals faithful Jews are not permitted to eat. Peter then hears a voice say something to the effect of – go ahead and eat!

This is when Cornelius’s men show up at Peter’s door and persuade him to come with them. Once they arrive at Cornelius’s house, Peter starts preaching the gospel.

But then something surprising happens, which is where our reading for today comes in. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone – even the Gentiles! And Peter wonders aloud, “*Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit, just like us?*”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president of the USA in 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression. Not long after his inauguration, a friend came to see FDR in the oval office and said, “Mr. President, if you succeed in solving the crisis of the Great Depression, you will go down [in history] as our greatest president. But if you fail, sir, you will go down as our worst.” FDR looked at him and responded, “If I fail, I’ll be the last.”

There are moments in the life of every organism and organisation – from people to families to churches to countries – when the stakes are so high and the challenges so significant that survival itself is on the line. Sometimes we are blessed enough to recognise these moments – to be aware, as Roosevelt was, of

just how serious the situation is. Other times, we only realise in retrospect just how close we came to losing everything.

When we read these stories in Acts about the formation of the early church, it’s obvious to us just how close this movement came to never getting off the ground, much less to becoming a religion that would shape the world.

But those who were there, those first Jesus followers, probably had no idea the weight of the decisions they were making: whether to stay behind locked doors or go out among God’s people; whether to share the gospel with Jews only or with everyone; whether following Jesus was more important than following the rules.

Although the answers to these questions may seem obvious to us now, for those first Jesus followers there was nothing easy or obvious about these decisions at all. This was especially true for Peter, who was not just any apostle - he was the one Jesus himself said would lead the church.

From the very beginning of Acts, we can see why Jesus chose Peter. He is a gifted preacher, and a wise and discerning leader. Peter recognises that it is the Holy Spirit causing the chaos of the first Pentecost. Peter is not afraid to speak on behalf of the other disciples. Peter believes enough in the power of God that he can cure the sick and even raise someone from the dead.

In today’s story we also discover that Peter also has a gift for what we now call ‘adaptive leadership’ – leadership that responds to emerging challenges that have no clear-cut solutions.

As much as the events in today’s passage must have shocked Peter – first the vision that overturns centuries-old food laws and then the invitation to enter the home of a Gentile – he nonetheless keeps going, trusting in the Holy Spirit to lead him into an unknown future.

Peter going to Cornelius’s house may not sound like such a big deal to us, but this is among the most significant encounters in all of Acts. Since Jews and Gentile didn’t interact socially, it would have been perfectly acceptable – even preferable – for Peter to say to those men, “I’m sorry, no can do. There have been too many new things already, too many changes to the status quo and the laws and traditions about me interacting with you are very clear!”

But this isn’t what Peter says. He says, “Yes,” and he goes and enters the home of a Gentile to share the good news of God’s love revealed in Jesus, extending that love to a whole new group of people. Peter says yes before he knows how it will turn out or what it will mean.

You don’t have to spend much time in any church to know that churches tend to attract people who can relate to Peter.

Churches appeal to people who want to do the right thing and have the right answer. People who want to know what the rules are and to follow the rules and make sure others follow them too. We churchgoers appreciate order and structure and clearly defined responsibilities.

Which means that, like Peter, all of us, at one point or another in the course of being part of the church, are going to come up against some questions that challenge our most basic assumptions and defy easy answers:

Will the church be able to maintain a place of relevance in our culture?

Who will want to be a part of our community, and will we be open to including them?

How can we bridge the differences between generations in a way that honours our past and moves us into the future?

Well, if leadership were easy, there wouldn’t be a whole industry devoted to it, with books and videos and coaches and consultants, most of which take complicated issues and boil them down into tools that, if followed, will produce the desired result, whether they are seven effective habits or four quadrants of productivity or five dysfunctions of a team.

And until Acts chapter 10, we could be forgiven for thinking that leadership in the church isn’t all that different from leadership in any other organisation. Until Acts chapter 10, we could be forgiven for thinking that it is Peter who made the church the Church, or for assuming that it is us who must make sure the church stays the Church.

But this story makes clear: the church didn’t become the Church because of Peter or Paul or any of the other apostles. The church also didn’t become the Church because of non-Jews who insisted that God’s promises were for them too.

What made the church the Church then, and what makes the church the Church now, is the **Holy Spirit**.

When Peter starts preaching to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit cuts him off. Then, for the first time in Acts, the Holy Spirit shows up and pours itself out on Gentiles, a whole new set of people, not when they are baptised or after they are baptised, but before they are baptised.

Which is why Peter asks the rhetorical question, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit?” – clearly the answer is no.

It at this moment that we realise that Peter is not the main character in the Book of Acts. No human being is.

The main character of Acts, the primary leader of the church – then and NOW – is the Holy Spirit. Rather than ‘The Acts of the Apostles’, a better title, in my opinion, would have been ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit.’ Which means this movement is not about us – our words, our wisdom, our abilities – it’s about God’s Word – Jesus – and God’s wisdom – the Holy Spirit – and God’s ability to move us beyond our limited vision of who God is and who we are called to be as God’s church.

Notice that it is when Peter is doing what Peter does best – preaching! – that the Holy Spirit cuts him off, making it very clear that this movement is about so much more than whoever is the leader of any church. Leadership in the church is not about having the answers or following the rules.

Leadership in the church is about letting go of our assumptions and agendas and allowing the Spirit of God to move, to interrupt, to pour out even on the last people we would ever expect God to choose as leaders. Even on us.

When she was in seminary, a respected pastor told American priest, academic and author, Barbara Brown Taylor that “being ordained is not about serving God perfectly but about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall. You probably won’t be much worse than people,” he said to her, “and you certainly won’t be any better, but you will have to let people look at you. You will have to let them see you as you are.”

Perhaps, every person who joins a church, and especially those who take a position of leadership in the church should have to answer this question:

“Will you let people see you, even when you don’t have the answer, or you’ve made a mistake; even when you’re afraid and uncertain; even when you feel the Spirit moving you in a direction you’d rather not go?”

It’s so tempting for us to make leadership in the church about our talents and abilities and knowledge. It’s tempting, but wrong. Because really the only job of church leaders is to be followers. Followers of the unpredictable, erratic, and at times downright shocking movement of the Spirit, which is, after all, the presence of God here and now. And we can pretty much guarantee that the Spirit will push and prod and pull us to go places we never imagined we would go, even places we don’t want to go. While that may sound much harder than following a rule book, the good news is that when we are willing to follow, the Spirit will lead us into a future we could never predict but where we will experience the boundary-breaking, custom-defying, all-encompassing love of God.

Amen.

We come now to our prayers of intercession, that is prayers for other people. Again, I am preparing this service over a week in advance, so these are somewhat generic. Please feel free to pause the video / audio to pray your own prayers about issues of the day.

Let us pray:

God of love, friend to those in power,
with the local elections this week we are reminded of the privilege we have in being able to engage in democracy and vote. Whatever our political leanings, we pray for those who have retained or gained places on our local councils. May they be diligent in working for the communities they serve, passionate about improving the lives of others, and open to listening to views different from their own. Equip *all* of our political representatives with the gifts of thoughtfulness, grace and integrity.

God of love,
hear our prayer.

God of love, friend to those in pain,
we look at the ongoing situation unfolding in Gaza and continue to feel despair for those who are dying and for those grieving for loved ones. We pray for the urgent supplies Gaza needs to arrive quickly. We pray that Israelis and Palestinians can find a way to coexist, with justice and peace for all. We also pray for resolution in the war between Russia and the Ukraine.

God of love,
hear our prayer.

God of love, friend to those who are tired,
even though the Covid pandemic is no longer the threat it was, we know that many of our medics, nursing staff and other health professionals are exhausted trying to cope with the backlog of cases. Help those in the NHS who are weary find rest and renewed enthusiasm for their work. There are also many members of our wider communities left with long covid symptoms, struggling with daily life. We ask for

insightful research into the after-effects of coronavirus and ways to help those who are still finding it hard to return to normal life.

God of love,
hear our prayer.

God of love, friend to those who are struggling,
as the country continues to face the effects of the economic downturn and cost of living crisis, we think of the people who have lost their jobs and faced financial hardship as a result. We ask for resilience in the face of such difficult times, perseverance as people seek new work and try to cope with the demands of everyday life and courage to face the challenges each new day brings.

God of love,
hear our prayer.

God of love, friend of our friends,
thank you for the gift of friendship. Thank you for the people who bring fun and joy into our lives. Thank you for the warmth friends bring. Bless our friends and help us to look to Jesus to learn how to deepen our friendships and live the life of love he modelled.

God of love,
hear our prayer.

Amen.

We come now to our final hymn, which is number **418** in Singing the Faith, “We have a Gospel to proclaim.” There is an organ accompaniment on the video and audio files and a YouTube link for those who can use it.

The music and words can also be found here: [YouTube Link](#)

We have a gospel to proclaim,
good news for all throughout the earth;
the gospel of a Saviour’s name:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.

Tell of his birth at Bethlehem,
not in a royal house or hall
but in a stable dark and dim:
the Word made flesh, a light for all.

Tell of his death at Calvary,
hated by those he came to save;
in lonely suffering on the cross
for all he loved, his life he gave.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
empty the tomb, for he was free;
he broke the power of death and hell
that we might share his victory.

Tell of his reign at God’s right hand
by all creation glorified;
he sends his Spirit on his church
to live for him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth;
this gospel-message we proclaim:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.

Blessing

Loving God, thank you for sending Jesus to show us your love.
Help us to make new friends and comfort those who are lonely.
Show us that, although we are all different, we are all loved
by you. Surprise us with your love in this coming week.

Amen.

So, as we come to the close of our worship together, may I thank you once again for allowing me to spend this time with you. I wish you God's blessing throughout the week to come. Take great care of yourselves.

Julian Tawn

22nd April 2024