

Sermon on Sunday 24 May 2026

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Acts 2. 1-21 & John 20. 19-23

Pentecost: 'A wing, a torch, a promise'

How will you be remembered?

Throughout history human beings have been preoccupied with being remembered. Our cities and our churches are full of posthumous monuments to the great, the good and the not-so-good. But why wait 'til you're dead? The current President of the United States is already building memorials to his memory with a lavish state ballroom, a 250ft-tall triumphal arch and his very own golf-course golden effigy!

This is nothing new, of course. In Genesis we read of the great Tower of Babel where, post-flood, those early peoples decide to build a great tower skyscraping into the heavens. Modern archaeology suggests that these ancient near-eastern Ziggurats were built, not to reach for God or storm the heavens, but in the hope that God might come down and dwell with them. And that's

understandable if their interpretation of something as cataclysmic as a flood, or tsunami, was God giving up on humanity. So, why isn't God pleased? Well, the clue is there. They did this to make a name for *themselves*, to be remembered, rather than to make a name for God. They hoped they could persuade God to be their own personal deity, fight their fights, further their empire.

So, God, we're told, confuses their plans by dropping different languages into the mix so they can't communicate with one another. Therefore, they had to jettison these plans of world domination, and scatter. This Babel myth (from which we get our word 'babble') is an early attempt to explain how different languages and cultures evolved.

Richard Rohr says that we shouldn't see this as God's punishment but, 'a necessary grace'. In the best interest of everyone, we humans need to know that we are not the centre of the universe.

Fast forward to this story from today; this day of Pentecost. This is in many ways the reversal of that Babel story. Where Babel brought division and confusion through language, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enables the believers to bring unity and community by speaking the language of others. The good news of Christ is heard in the mother tongue of all, and bridges all barriers of

language and difference, creating a new and inclusive church for all.

And instead of constructing a tower that invited God to dwell with them, the people themselves became a living dwelling place for God, symbolised by those tongues of fire; a symbol of the presence of God. No longer did people need towers or temples, God was now at home within us and among us.

We live in a modern-day Babel. Although communication is easier and more connected than ever, the paradox is that we are more fragmented and divided than ever. Better connection hasn't meant better understanding. Any shared notion of truth has gone as we splinter into our echo-chambers, where language is often used to fracture rather than heal.

We need a new Pentecost where we move from enforcing a single language or culture, or indeed religion, to a unity in diversity. And the best way to understand someone is to learn their language. That could mean an actual language but more importantly, the language of what's important to that person; How do they see the world? What holy ground do we share?

We need a new Pentecost where we faithfully pray that ancient prayer, 'Come, Holy Spirit'.

Come, Holy Spirit, like the wind, wild and indiscriminate, blowing through the sails of every culture, every life.

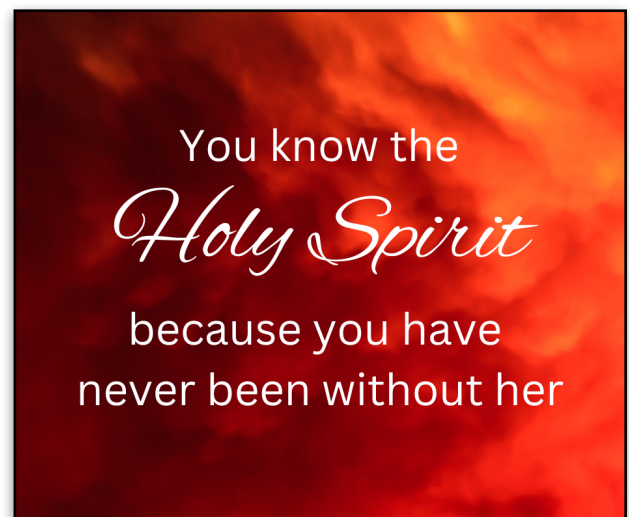
Come, Holy Spirit, like breath, breathing life into tired and jaded souls, regulating our bodies, stilling our minds.

Come, Holy Spirit, like water, bathing our wounds, washing away our prejudice, cleansing our past, refreshing our present.

Come, Holy Spirit, like fire igniting our consciences, illuminating our lives, fuelling our compassion.

Come, Holy Spirit, like a dove in peace and tenderness, carrying hope.

And you know this Spirit, because you have never been without her. Any time you've felt a nudge in a particular direction. Any time



you've sensed something bigger. Any time you've felt empathy. Any time you've wept. This is the Spirit within and around.

So, how will you be remembered?

What legacy of that one eternal thing called love, will you leave behind?

Not in marble or bricks and mortar, but in kindness and compassion.

I'll leave you with some of my favourite words from the writer Dawna Markova:

'I will not die an unlived life. I will not live in fear of falling or catching fire. I choose to inhabit my days, to allow my living to open me, to make me less afraid, more accessible, to loosen my heart until it becomes a wing, a torch, a promise.'

Come, Holy Spirit, come.