

Acts 2.1-41

In step with the Spirit

Christ Church Selly Park

Pentecost Sunday 28 May 2023

The Fab Four

I don't know if it's a boy thing but I often make top five lists in my head... top five films? ¶ Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has to be number 1 for me. Then ¶ the original *Star Wars* trilogy, ¶ *The Matrix*, ¶ *Aliens* (the second one), and finally ¶ *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Fantasy, sci-fi and silly comedy... pretty much sums up my taste in TV and film!

Perhaps you'd prefer to do a top five bands – someone recent like Adele, a bit further ago like Dire Straits, or maybe even further back like the Rolling Stones or the Beatles?

Well today we reach the end of ¶ the *real* Fab Four (see what I did there?): cross, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. But the question is: which is top of the list? Which is most important?

Of course they all go together, part of the one event of salvation – and if we miss out or prioritise one we end up unbalanced.

Cross (23): love

The cross tells us of God's love. We say 'God is love' and 'God loves you' – but what do we mean? Hear what God says love is **J**:

J This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4.10 (NIV)

The greatest example of love is an act, an act of supreme self-sacrifice, offered willingly. It's both wonderful and sobering: our sin is so awful that God's own Son had to die to bear the consequences of it, but that is the depth of God's love for us.

J The cross tells us of God's love.

Resurrection (24, 32): power

The resurrection tells us of God's power. All the forces of evil, even death itself could not **keep its hold on [Jesus]** (24). The power of God's life and love is stronger than anything else in all creation. The resurrection tells us death is not the end, for in the end *the Lamb wins*.

The resurrection tells us of God's power.

Ascension (33): authority

The ascension tells us of God's authority, given to Jesus. He has been **exalted to the right hand of God** (33), he has been given the name above every name, before which every knee will one day bow. Jesus has the authority, Jesus is *Lord*.

Of the Fab Four this is perhaps the one we find hardest. It's easy to give in to the darkness, to believe the lie that God doesn't care or he is as helpless as we are before the powers of evil and death. And it's easy to live as if Jesus is *not* Lord, looking no different to those around us, living *my* way instead of *his* way.

But the ascension tells us Jesus *is* Lord: and he is Lord of *all*.

Pentecost (33): generosity

The last of the Fab Four is Pentecost, which tells us of God's generosity. In the Old Testament times God gave his Spirit to particular people in particular places for particular purposes – here we see an explosion as God *pours out* his Spirit on *everyone*: young and old, male and female, from the lowest to the highest (17-18).

What comes to mind when you hear the words 'pour out'? J
 Perhaps you think of a kettle pouring out boiling water to make a cup of tea? J Or pouring out water into a glass?

Or perhaps like David and Dee recently you've had the 'pleasure' of experiencing the pouring rain in New Zealand.

§ In Milford Sound they measure rainfall not in centimetres but in *metres*: 6.5m of rain falls there every year (that's over 250 inches). England has less than a quarter of that.

§ Maybe you've stood by a waterfall and seen the torrent cascading down, pouring and roaring into the pool far below.

The prophecy Peter quotes from Joel is much more like the second two examples: it doesn't describe a trickle but a torrent, not a whimper but a bang as God soaks and drenches his people with his Spirit.

Together the Fab Four are the most significant event in history since creation: the birth of a new age, the age of the Church. The Church is built on the foundation of the cross which shows us what love is and the depths of God's love for us. The Church was created by the power of resurrection, and now the Church lives under Jesus' authority, with the Spirit poured into our hearts as the first fruits, guarantee and promise of what is to come.

The Fab Four are really one event: the birth of a new age, the age of the Church, drenched with the Holy Spirit.

1. The Holy Spirit: sent from God

Let's explore more about who the Holy Spirit is and what he does.

First, the Holy Spirit is **sent from God**.

In my second year at university my director of studies called me into his office. One of the freshers was finding it hard to get her head round one of the papers. He recognised she needed some extra help, but wasn't able to give it himself. So he sent me: not because I was any good, but I'd taken the paper a few months before so I knew what was required. And – *most* importantly – as a student I had more time than him!

So I knocked on her door, asked how things were going, she managed (just) not to burst into tears, and we spent the whole evening looking at her essay together. I was able to give her the time our tutor could not, which is why he sent me. He helped her – but he helped her by sending me.

Jesus said: **‘I will send [the Advocate] to you’** (John 15.26) and, **‘It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you’** (John 16.7). It's not that Jesus can't be bothered or doesn't have time: sending the Spirit is *better* than him staying behind!

Like Jesus the Spirit is a gift – the Father gives us the very best he has, he gives us himself. For the Spirit is every bit as much God as the Father and Son. Confused? Forget those pictures of shamrocks or steam, water and ice – there is no picture that can help us grasp how God can be one God in three persons.

Today all I want us to hear is that that the Spirit is God's gift of himself to us, **poured** into our hearts to – well, to do *what*?

2. The Holy Spirit: teaches the truth

Let's have another look at John. Jesus said **J**:

'I will send [the Advocate] to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth.'

'When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.'

John 15.26 & 16.13 (NIV)

Have you ever had that moment when something clicks into place? Like when where you suddenly realise who a person is – 'Oh *you're* so-and-so.'

Jess and I went to a quiz night at my Dad's church on Friday – the church I grew up at. There are many new people there now who know who I am because the rest of my family still worship there, but don't know me by sight because on a Sunday I'm usually either at my own church, or on holiday!

On Friday I was chatting away to such a person who suddenly said, 'Oh you're *Ben...*' and she followed it up with, 'I know Alison – Alison Page!' I was briefly confused because to me Ally is so definitely 'Ally' (!).

I think Peter experienced something like that at Pentecost. He knew the prophecy in Joel, and he knew what Jesus had promised about **the Advocate** – and then when the Spirit came upon them he realised, 'Oh, *this is that!*'

What was happening was exactly what Joel had foretold. If you look back to Acts 1.15 you'll see there were about 120 believers – they are the ones who **were all together** in verse 1 of our reading. It wasn't only the Twelve minus Judas – there were women there, some of them were old, others young – so when **all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit** (4), Peter realised *this was that*: the long-awaited fulfilment of Joel's prophecy about the pouring out of God's **Spirit on all people** (17).

It's like his spiritual eyes and ears were opened, so he could see and hear the truth of what God was doing – just like Jesus said. The Holy Spirit is our teacher – he teaches us and helps us understand what God is saying to us *today*, through words written thousands of years ago. These words are trustworthy and true, they are the Word of God himself speaking through the words of men. The Spirit teaches, he teaches **what he hears**: words spoken by the Father, the words of Scripture which bear witness to Jesus.


3. The Holy Spirit: bears witness to Jesus

And that's number three. The Holy Spirit is (1) **sent from God**, he (2) **teaches the truth**, and he **(3) bears witness to Jesus**.

If you go walking somewhere popular – like Snowdon in Wales – the walking routes often have signposts at the start of the most-used routes pointing up and saying 'Snowdon'.

Now imagine I put on my walking gear: woolly hat, raincoat (it's Wales after all), backpack full of water, sandwiches and maps – and then sat down by the signpost saying, 'Snowdon isn't quite what I thought.' You'd probably think I'd lost my mind! 'No,' you'd say, 'that's not the *end* of the walk, it's showing you the way to go!'

A signpost is not an end in itself: its purpose is to point to something else. Like a signpost the Holy Spirit's aim is to point away from himself, and direct us to Jesus.

Listen to these words of Jesus :

‘When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – **he will testify about me.**’

‘... he will speak what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. **He will glorify me.**’

John 15.26 & 16.13-14 (NIV)

One of the ways we can tell if something is from God, if it's from the Holy Spirit, is if it constantly, faithfully and relentlessly points us to Jesus. If it distracts us from Jesus, tells us to do something contrary to God's Word, and especially if it denies Jesus is Lord and God in the flesh – then it is *not* from the *Holy* Spirit, it's from another kind of spirit entirely. The Holy Spirit points us to Jesus.

But he also enables us to be witnesses, too. There is an unbroken line of countless faithful Christians, from Peter preaching in the streets of Jerusalem, to us here today.

Because Peter bore witness to Jesus, because all those Christians through the centuries bore witness to Jesus, we can know Jesus today. Because *they* were signposts pointing to Jesus *we* can know him and point others to him *today*.

For ultimately that's all the Church has to offer. We can – and do – show God's love in all sorts of practical ways. But unless we also tell people about who Jesus is and what he's done, how they can be forgiven and have new life as children of God – unless we do that, we aren't a Church, we're a social club.

But if we do that, if in the power of the Holy Spirit we bear witness by sharing and showing Jesus, we bring glory to God, for we will be doing what we are called and commanded to do.

4. The Holy Spirit: convicts of sin

Peter ended his sermon like this **J**:

‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.’

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘What shall we do?’

Acts 2.36 (NIV)

The Holy Spirit was at work that day, not only in the 120 or so believers, but in the crowd hearing Peter's message, as they were convicted of their sin. It's tempting to write this off as the people regretting the way they shouted 'Crucify him!' before Pilate. But think about it – verses 5 to 11 tell us that many in the crowd were visitors from across the known world. Most of them would not have been in Jerusalem 50 days earlier.

So when Peter said, **'this Jesus, whom you crucified'** – it's a figure of speech, and it applies to us as much as to them. It is our sin and theirs which nailed Jesus to the cross every bit as much as the Roman soldier who wielded the hammer. That is the horrifying truth – which the Holy Spirit revealed to the crowd that day; no wonder **they were cut to the heart** (36).

So Peter replied: 'It's ok, God loves you, he accepts everything about you, and he has a wonderful plan for your life.' No he doesn't, because that isn't the gospel, it's no better than a half-truth, and it is a cheap version of God's grace. Instead, Peter said:

'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.'

Acts 2.38 (NIV)

In Acts there are many gospel speeches and sermons. Not one of them – not *one* – even *uses* the word ‘love’, let alone the phrase ‘God loves you’. But *every single one* uses a variation of: ‘repent and believe and receive the forgiveness of your sins.’


Of *course* behind that is the love of God – but the *gospel*, the good news, is what God’s love has *done* for us in Jesus, it’s what his love *gives* us in Jesus: complete forgiveness, new life, a new identity as a child of God, adopted into his family.

That is truly good news. That is a life worth dying for.

Come, Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is (1) sent from God, (2) teaches the truth, (3) bears witness to Jesus and (4) convicts of sin. And – if we had all day – (5) he is the gift who gives. He enhances our natural talents, he gives new gifts, he calls and equips us for ministries, he bears fruit in the lives of God’s children. We cannot be God’s people without him, we need him within us to enable us to walk and live as children of God – in step with the Spirit.

All that needs exploring – just not today!

God gives the Spirit to all his children – the problem is, we leak! So we need to pray every day,  ‘Come Holy Spirit, be poured out on me, fill me, and make me new.’ As I said on Pentecost Sunday last year, let’s make that our prayer – and perhaps when you pray the words ‘be poured out’ you might picture the torrent of a waterfall or the pouring New Zealand rain.

Let us end with a prayer – these are the words of a hymn by Joseph Hart:

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Let thy bright beams arise;

Dispel the sorrow from our minds,

The darkness from our eyes.

Convince us of our sin;

Then lead to Jesus’ blood,

And to our wondering view, reveal

The secret love of God.

Revive our drooping faith;

Our doubts and fears remove;

And kindle in our breasts the flame

Of never-dying love.

'Tis thine to cleanse the heart,
To sanctify the soul,
To pour fresh life in every part,
And new-create the whole.

Dwell, therefore, in our hearts;
Our minds from bondage free;
Then we shall know, and praise, and love,
The Father, Son, and Thee.

*Come, Holy Spirit, come by Joseph Hart
quoted in JI Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, 207-8*