

Pentecost Sunday, 2025

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Ramsden Sermon – *A Promise Fulfilled*  
Great St. Mary's Church, Cambridge University  
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May the grace of our Lord Christ Jesus and the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit be upon us all, here and everywhere, on this Pentecost Sunday.

Thank you, friends, for this great privilege you have bestowed upon me. To stand in the line of others more worthy than I to bring this year's Ramsden Sermon is truly an honor and a gift. Thank you.

As I have prayed over this sermon and for those of you who would receive it, I was reminded of my very first visit to England in December of 1998. It was actually a day layover as I travelled to the World Council of Churches Assembly held that year in Harare, Zimbabwe. As I faced that long wait for my connecting flight, I decided to visit Wesley's Chapel in London built by John Wesley the founder of Methodism.

I took the Tube, walked a bit, then took a taxi after I was nearly run over attempting to cross a street. Yes, I looked the wrong way! I was also a bit anxious about visiting Wesley's Chapel. Would I know how to behave properly? Would I be welcomed? Would I fit in?

I am a third generation Methodist, but I am from across the pond – way across the pond! I am from the Southern-most area of the state of Texas, I am of Mexican descent, almost born in Mexico, and I grew up in a Spanish-speaking Methodist church. Was I Methodist enough? I needn't have worried.

The minute I arrived at Wesley's Chapel I was home! Those whom I met there that day were so very welcoming down to then Superintendent Minister Leslie Griffiths who later was named the Right Honorable Lord Griffiths of Burry Port's Post. A future English Lord went out in the rain to help me exchange dollars for pounds so that I could get back to Heathrow Airport! Amazing! But there was even more to the experience.

I felt connected to these wonderful people and that historic place. I knew the liturgy, the hymns of faith, the history of world-wide Christian connections. We were grounded together in holy scripture.

I ended my time at Wesley's Chapel sitting on a bench in the rain talking to John Wesley at his grave site. A man of deep faith whom God used to birth Methodism but who never left his beloved Church of England, the church of his birth, and the community where he was spiritually formed. Today, we of the United Methodist Church yearn to continue strengthening our family ties with you our beloved brothers and sisters who are faithful to our common faith through the Church of England.

As I stand before you, I am again filled with feelings of connection and being home now among you. After leaving Wesley's Chapel that day 27 years ago, I felt a lightness of spirit, and the joy

of belonging. And, as I prayed my way forward, I came to realize that what I had experienced and continue to experience to this day with you, was and is the gift of the Holy Spirit that binds us all together as One – One with God, One with Christ our Lord, and One with the Holy Spirit. We are One, called and empowered together to ministry in and to the whole world! This is a divine promise fulfilled. On Pentecost Sunday we remember and rejoice in this sacred promise and its fulfillment.

The prophet Joel prophesied the blessed promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It would be nothing less than the coming of the Day of the Lord! And on that day, God would pour out the Holy Spirit upon all people with such power that mothers and fathers would stand in awe as their sons and daughters prophesied. Old men watching others fulfill their dreams, for their own lives had been spent, would suddenly again be dreaming dreams! Young men and women just beginning to discern their future, would have visions, God-sized visions! Servants, given no room for opinion and certainly no voice, would also have the Holy Spirit descend upon them. And all of them would see wonders in the heavens and on the earth. It would be a day of salvation that would require only calling upon the name of the Lord! (Joel 2:28-32) This was a prophesy, and a mighty promise of God made to his people.

When a prophesy came to God's people it was with the understanding that they were being called to do something that would be pleasing to God. Usually, it was that they needed to behave in Godly ways leaving behind their evil paths. But Joel's prophesy is different.

We know very little about the Prophet, Joel. We know the name of his father – Pethuel. Research leads us to believe that he and God's people probably lived at that time in but a tiny Sub-province of the Persian Empire. Joel had no truly new prophecies, depending instead on the prophecies of earlier prophets. But the Prophet Joel did have a uniquely different world view, one that extended into the distant future and with a much broader sense of community.

The heart of Joel's prophetic word may come from his name, a name with a purpose, as Biblical Scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier proposes. Joel means, *Yahweh is God*. I agree with Dr. Achtemeier when she surmises that God's people have a collective sin to address and it is the sin of apostasy, the failure to recognize that Yahweh alone is God. The people have forgotten the identity of their God, the sovereign one who alone holds Creation and all of them in the palm of God's divine hand.

This could have been a foreboding realization as God's people of old listened to the Prophet Joel, but there is a tenderness in the words of Yahweh, the true God, that comforts them as God alone can do. The Prophet Joel captures God's tenderness in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, the 27th verse. Yahweh, God, says to the people:

*You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,  
And that I, the Lord, am your God and there  
is no other.  
And my people shall never again be put to shame.*

The Lord, our God yearns for an intimate relationship with us, a caring and loving relationship of eternal faithfulness, at least on God's part. A sacred word about the nature of the relationship God

yearns to have with humanity that would be affirmed in the life and witness of Jesus our Lord. In the Gospel of John, we catch a precious holy glimpse of God's heart through Jesus.

One day Jesus said to the disciples as they worried about his impending death:

*<sup>15</sup> "If you love me, keep my commands. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—<sup>17</sup> the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. <sup>18</sup> I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. John 14:15-18*

Friends, on Pentecost Sunday this sacred promise was fulfilled! As the disciples gathered to discern their future without the earthly Jesus, a violent wind from heaven blew upon them and filled the whole house where they were. Tongues of fire alighted above each of their heads, and their tongues were loosened and the Holy Spirit enabled them to speak in other tongues. In that moment they were indeed filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, who would forever be with them and with all who call upon the name of the Lord!

As Christians all over the world, we celebrate Pentecost Sunday as an affirmation that we too are blessed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Spirit of Truth. Blessed by the eternal faithfulness of God!

Do you not see it? Do you not feel it? Do we not know the Holy Spirit? Holy Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit lives in us and is with us always. I prayerfully work to live in this space of claiming the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, but often I receive the witness of this precious blessing from someone else; a witness that leaves me humbled and amazed by God's eternal faithfulness.

I have long been an advocate for migrants who are forced to travel all over the world for safety, for life and future. Working with migrants has always been an important part of my ministry. Perhaps because I come from a migrant family and because I have served in border communities almost all my ministry, where to this very day migrants continue to arrive.

Forced migration caused by famine, poverty, violence, political unrest, war and climate change is a cruel thing. It destroys families, leaves children parentless fending for themselves, and leaves human carnage strewn all over the world in desert places, jungles, in fast running rivers and deep dark seas, in dense urban settings and isolated rural regions. I have never met more vulnerable yet also more resilient people than migrants on the run!

It saddens me to my core to see so many of us everywhere hate migrants, viewing them as invaders, criminals, parasites, as rubbish to be discarded, unworthy of being treated as human beings. Some of these migrants have lost their children and even their entire family along the migrant journey, some have lost limbs, some have suffered violent beatings, migrant women have been raped, some have been brought so close to death in their efforts to find safety that they pray for death. But when I have asked those suffering migrants whom I have met from all over the world, "How did you make it through the horrendous ordeals you experienced on your migrant journey?" all of them have said to me, "God was with me; within me, before me, behind me, around me, God was with me, God was with us."

On their forced migration journey our brothers and sisters have seen and experienced the presence of God's Holy Spirit. Migrants are not all saints, but so many of them do truly come to us as angels proclaiming that God is present in the world caring for all of us as we struggle with the challenges and burdens of our living. God is with us! God chooses to show up for us in real time! God has been seen on the trails of life by our migrant siblings! Good News indeed!

Every time I welcome and serve among migrants, I experience a tender fire descend upon all of us present, warming our hearts. Somehow, we are able to speak a language we each understand. Whatever the language of the migrant, or my language, we are somehow enabled to communicate! I believe it is the presence of the Holy Spirit that allows us to see ourselves in the vulnerability of the other and hear the voice of our own suffering, binding us together in love and hope for one another.

I also need to share with you that the migrants whom I have met who have said that God was with them on their perilous journey have not all been Christians. Many of them are of different faiths, yet they all claim the name of God as the One who has mercifully saved them.

This witness has stirred in my spirit for many years now, and this is what I would share with you Christian friends: Let us cling to Christ our Lord, our Savior and Redeemer of all that is, but let us not be dismissive of God's presence and power in the world. Nor let us ever underestimate God's heart.

There were faithful Jews there on Pentecost day, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven, scripture reports. But they were not the only ones present. Present also were Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs, and they ALL experienced Pentecost as well, down to hearing in their own languages those early Christians gathered on Pentecost declare the wonders of God!

Those outside of that early Christian community were amazed and perplexed and asked one another, "What does this mean?" I believe that what it means is that God's heart is broken by the suffering of every one of God's children. God is with us in the grief of our human brokenness, grieving with us just as God grieved with the first disciples who suffered in the death of Jesus. In our physical and spiritual suffering, and in our loss of hope, God seeks to save us all! And in God's telling, there is no wondrous news that is given to some and hidden from others. God's compassion, mercy and eternal love are given to all, without exception. God is with us, with us all.

If this Pentecost Sunday stirs anything within our spirits, I hope that it is a renewed commitment to welcoming the Holy Spirit into our spirits and to living as those who believe, truly believe, that the promise that God will be with us today and every day, has been fulfilled. God is with us and with all of God's Creation. Can we commit, therefore, to proclaiming this message of loving relationship with the divine and eternal hope into every space of our living?

Now, you and I know that every time we step out as a people of power and vision through the Holy Spirit, there will be those who will look at us, consider our witness and like some on Pentecost as they observed the early Christians, will say about us, “They have had too much wine, they are drunk!” “They know nothing about politics, or economics, or governing. They are naïve and unsophisticated, silly dreamers!” Well, let them say what they will! We have work to do! Holy, sacred work. The work of the Holy Spirit in the powerful name of our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

And may I make some suggestions about this holy, sacred work? I believe that our work needs to include:

- Caring for the poor, the orphan, the widow, those of broken bodies and hopeless spirit, and the imprisoned.
- Welcoming and extending compassionate care to migrants, but even more than that, addressing the root causes of their migration.
- Demanding that the people of Gaza be set free, their empty bellies fed, their wounds healed, their communities rebuilt, their sovereignty honored and respected.
- Declaring that the invasion of Ukraine needs to end, the truth of its wrongness told and a commitment to no more war be made.
- Unveiling as an evil act and not just as a historic fact, that which is called the Berlin Conference, convened 140 years ago to partition the continent of Africa, giving foreign powers the right to colonize and exploit African resources, a violent act that continues to this day to hold many Africans hostage in political, social and economic ways. Such evil needs to be examined carefully, but most importantly, real amends need to be made to the people of Africa. It does not escape me as a U.S. citizen that this robbing of the African peoples benefitted my country and many other countries as well. Together, we all bear a responsibility in making Africa whole again.
- Taking the prophetic word with courage and faithfulness to the self-anointed strongmen striving to control the world and saying to them that in this world and the world to come there is only one true and eternal sovereign, one Lord, who calls us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8), and it is not them!
- Standing and living in peace and love with all people, with a biblical preference for the poor, regardless of race or culture, wherever they come from in the world, whatever their religious beliefs, gender, or sexual orientation, or ability, in the true belief that we are all equally children of God, made in God’s image and likeness.

Let us do so without fear or doubt, holding before us the witness of the Apostle Peter. A simple man who had to work hard to comprehend who Jesus was and is, often spoke out of place and out of line, and even betrayed our Lord. Peter who struggled, but whom Jesus chose as the rock upon which he built his eternal Church. (Matthew 16:18)

And when others turn to us wondering who we are, let's join Peter in boldly proclaiming that we are Christians, blessed with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, a promise fulfilled by our faithful God. A blessing we yearn to share with everyone.

Amen and amen.