

starters for Sunday

Pentecost

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The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Dr Paul Middleton, Senior Lecturer - New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of Chester for his thoughts on Pentecost.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

The Feast of Pentecost marks the coming of the Holy Spirit, and is celebrated ten days after the Ascension, and fifty days after Easter. In Luke's account, the Spirit is poured upon the nascent church, which is gathered together in one place. Although Pentecost is often called the "birthday of the Church," we should note that an event such as Luke describes is not recorded anywhere else (or even alluded to) in the New Testament. The lectionary encourages us to link Luke's account of the Pentecost experience with John's discourse on the Paraclete ([John 14-16](#)). However, in contrast to Luke's dramatic account, in John, the Spirit is quietly imparted to the disciples through Jesus' breath ([John 20: 22](#)).

Luke's account of Pentecost takes place at the Jewish harvest celebration, the Festival of Weeks (see [Exodus 23: 16](#); [34: 22](#); [Leviticus 23: 15-21](#); [Numbers 28: 26](#); [Deuteronomy 16: 9-12](#)). The modern equivalent, Shavuot, celebrates the renewal of the Sinai covenant. Although some scholars doubt this particular connection goes back all the way to the first century, the link is clearly made in the book of Jubilees (first or second century BCE), which dates the giving of the Law to "the first year of the Exodus of the children of Israel out of Egypt, in the third month, on the sixteenth day of the month [The date of Weeks]" (1:1). *Jubilees* (a retelling of Genesis) also connects the giving of the Law to the renewal of the earth after the flood:

And He gave to Noah and his sons a sign that there should not again be a flood on the earth. He set His bow in the cloud for a sign of the eternal covenant that there should not again be a flood on the earth to destroy it all the days of the earth. For this reason it is ordained and written on the heavenly tablets, that they should celebrate the feast of weeks in this month once a year, to renew the covenant every year. (Jubilees 6: 15-17)



The author of this text (which is canonical for the Ethiopic church) brings together the themes of Law, covenant, renewal, and promise, which may be exploited by the preacher seeking to approach the familiar Pentecost story from a different angle.

Notes on the Readings

[Acts 2: 1–21](#)

The reading from Acts can be used either as the first or Gospel reading. The passage falls into three clear sections:

1-4 A description of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit

5-13 The effect and reaction

14-21 The first part of Peter’s speech

The author in the first four verses attempts to describe the experience of the coming of the Spirit. To do so, he employs phenomena often associated with theophanies (appearances of God)—wind and fire (cf. [Exodus 3: 2](#); [13: 21-22](#); [19: 18](#); [1 Kings 19: 11-12](#); [Isaiah 66: 15](#)). However, there is also an unmistakable link with elements of John the Baptist’s message ([Luke 3: 16](#); cf. [Acts 19: 1-6](#)). Pentecost is the moment when John’s words—“He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire”—find their fulfilment.

The description of the experience is brief, and not particularly easy to visualise. A strong wind filled the house in which the believers were gathered, “and divided tongues as like fire appeared to them and rested on each one.” While the number in the house is not specified, it is likely Luke intends the reader to understand all 120 members of the church mentioned in 1:15 were all gathered together. The text emphasises that when the divided tongues rested on “each one of them” (1:3) they were “all filled with the Holy Spirit.” The immediate manifestation of this was their ability to speak in other languages.

The Pentecost event is in part interpreted by its foretelling in both [Luke 24](#) and [Acts 1](#), where receiving the Spirit ([Acts 1: 8](#)) is described as both the “promise of the Father” ([Luke 24: 49/Acts 1: 4](#)) and receiving/being clothed in power ([Luke 24: 49/Acts 1: 8](#)). The coming of the Spirit is also strongly connected to preaching the Gospel ([Luke 24: 44–48](#)). The Spirit empowers the believers to become Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then the whole world.



Luke's anticipation of the Church's world-wide mission may be the reason he chooses to describe empowerment by the Spirit in terms of speaking foreign languages. The point is reinforced when those in Jerusalem, gathered from the then known world, are able to hear the believers "telling of the mighty works of God" in their own language (2: 12). It is not clear if Luke imagines an additional 'miracle of hearing,' that is, whatever language was being spoken, each heard the gospel in their own.

The scene is in any case difficult to reconstruct: the believers begin in a house (2:1), but by 2:5, there has been an unannounced change of scene, so that those in Jerusalem can hear them. The point is that whether by a miracle of speaking only, or by hearing or speaking, the coming of the Spirit enables the gospel message to be spread to the whole world, effectively breaking down the confusion and division of the language barriers erected between people in the Babel narrative ([Genesis 11: 1-9](#)).

There is, of course, a possible link with the charismatic gift of glossolalia described in [1 Corinthians 12](#) and [14](#). Paul links (or more accurately, contrasts) the gift of tongues with the greater gift of prophecy (14: 1-2, 5). Paul, while by no means denigrating the gift of tongues, is anxious about anything that divides the church community. If no-one is able to interpret the strange speech, then it is not to the edification of the whole church. Paul's overriding concern in 1 Corinthians is the unity of the Church. In [1 Corinthians 14](#), Paul also anticipates almost perfectly one of the main emphases of Luke's Pentecost drama:

There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning; but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to the speaker a foreigner to me. (1 Corinthians 14: 10-11)

As the Babel story offers a possible explanation how nations and languages came to be, Luke's Pentecost narrative dramatizes the eschatological vision where all flesh might see the glory of God (cf. Isaiah. 40:5) through the pouring out of the Spirit.

The empowerment of the Spirit is an important theme throughout Acts (see [8: 14-17](#)), and is specifically associated with tongues and prophecy or preaching ([10: 44-48](#), cf. [11: 15-16](#); [19: 1-6](#)). Importantly, Acts decisively marks the transition of early Christianity from an exclusively intra-Jewish sect to a movement that included Gentiles. The story of Cornelius ([chapters 10-11](#)) is



pivotal, and the legitimacy of this transition is evidenced by Gentiles receiving the Spirit (cf. [John 3: 8](#)). In this context, the words of the prophet Joel are taken to anticipate the Pentecost experience, where “all flesh” ([Joel 2: 28](#) [3: 1 LXX]/[Acts 2: 17](#)) will be recipients of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s slight alteration of Joel’s “after this” to “in the last days” makes this link stronger. The Gentile mission for Luke is legitimatised by an appeal to both Old Testament prophecy and God’s eschatological action through the Spirit. Joel’s words also links the pouring of the spirit to preaching/prophesying, a connection already made by the account of the seventy Hebrew elders/prophets set apart by Moses ([Numbers 11: 25-29](#)). Luke’s Pentecost narrative fulfils Moses’ desire: “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!” ([11: 29](#)).

[Ezekiel 37: 1-14](#)

The prophet Ezekiel was active during the exilic period. The fall of Jerusalem is mentioned in [chapter 33](#), effectively declaring the death of the nation. However, as with much exilic material, [Ezekiel 37](#) looks forward to the rebirth and restoration of the people. Ezekiel imagines the nation as the valley of the dead, a wilderness of bones. The chapter envisages nothing short of the re-creation of the people, with God’s creative breath both reconstituting and reanimating the corpse of Israel, just as the first human was first fashioned and animated with the breath/spirit of God ([Genesis 2: 7](#)). While the compilers of the lectionary no doubt imagined the breath entering the corpse of Israel to relate to the spirit of God animating the body of Christ at Pentecost, this connection is somewhat stretched. Nonetheless, themes of renewal, revival, and new life could be exploited.

[Romans 8: 22-27](#)

[Chapter 8](#) forms a pivotal point in Paul’s letter to the Romans, culminating in the bold assertion that nothing in creation can separate the believer from the love of God ([8: 38-39](#)). Crucially, any present experience of suffering does not negate this belief, for it is outweighed by the eschatological reality about to be revealed ([8: 18](#)). As with Luke, the Spirit plays a central eschatological role in Paul’s thought, although Paul’s eschatology is more urgent. For Paul, Christian identity is defined by the Spirit; Christians both live in the Spirit, and the Spirit dwells in them ([8: 9](#)). This is the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, and which in turn gives life



to the bodies otherwise dead to the flesh ([8: 11](#)). [If both Romans and Ezekiel are used, this idea forms a neat link between the two].

Even with the Spirit, Christians, along with the rest of creation, must wait the final consummation of the age. Paul's belief in the imminence of this event is indicated by his use of labour pains imagery, a trope commonly used in early Christian thinking ([Mark 13: 8](#); [1 Thessalonians 5: 3](#); [Revelation 12: 2](#)). In the meantime, suffering is the present reality. However, the Spirit has been given as the first fruits of the promise of final redemption ([8: 23](#)). In describing the Spirit as the first fruits—an idea associated with the Harvest Festival of Weeks – Paul may be drawing on the Pentecost story. However, there is little other indication he is aware of the tradition.

The Spirit aids the Christian in the “in-between” time from Christ's resurrection to the final redemption. Believers are children of God, and fellow sufferers with Christ; the Spirit both confirms this reality, and helps the Church in its struggle with both internal conflict ([Romans 7](#)) and persecution until the time of the eschaton, when their adoption and redemption will be complete.

[John 15: 26–27](#); [16: 4b–15](#)

John offers an alternative means by which the Holy Spirit came to be active in the Church, which is far less dramatic than Luke's Pentecost account. The risen Jesus appears to the disciples hiding in a locked room on Easter evening. There is no mighty wind or tongues of flames. Instead “[Jesus] breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit!’” ([John 20: 22](#)). Again, in contrast to Luke, this does not lead to dramatic signs, such as the recipients of the Spirit speaking in other languages. However, as with Luke, the receiving of the Spirit is related to mission. As God has sent Jesus, so Jesus sends the disciples into the world ([20: 21](#)).

Much of John's material on the Spirit comes in the Farewell Discourse ([John 14 - 16](#)). Significantly, the Spirit (also called the paraclete: [John 14: 15-26](#); [15: 26](#); [16: 7](#)) effectively replaces Jesus, so that he continues to be with them after he returns to the Father. The Spirit helps the believers to remain in the Truth ([16: 13](#)). The Spirit has agency in John that is less apparent elsewhere in the New Testament, yet is by no means independent. The Spirit declares what he has heard from Jesus, who in turn has spoken the words of the Father. Nonetheless, John's and



Luke's treatment of the Spirit converge in pointing to Jesus. The Spirit glorifies Jesus ([16: 14](#)), and witness to Jesus, in the same way as believers are also called to be witnesses ([15: 26-27](#)).

Prayers



Living Stones is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It is also the theme for Heart and Soul 2015. *Living Stones* will be published on 30 April 2015. Pre-orders and discounts are available from [St Andrew Press](#).

Scripture sentences

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1: 1–2)

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:24)

No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3)

Collect

God, who as at this time did teach the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of the Holy Spirit: grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who lives and reigns with thee in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

(Book of Common Prayer, The Church of England)

For prayer suggestions, take a look at the many [prayer resources](#) available from the [Resourcing Worship Team](#) on Resourcing Mission.



Musical Suggestions

The 'Coming of the Spirit' section (CH4 581–597) contains many suitable hymns.

- CH4 581 Hail thee Festival Day
is for the more adventurous. Although it has a rousing chorus, two melodies are used for alternate verses. A choir singing the verses with the congregation joining in the refrain would make for an excellent opening (processional) hymn.
- CH4 582 O Day of Joy and Wonder
is also an excellent opening or closing hymn, although Crüger (CH3 327) is a tune more suitable to this festival hymn than the more introspective Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen.
- CH4 597 Living Spirit
can be sung to Laus Deo (CH4 603) as an alternative to Ellen.

In addition to the hymns in the 'Coming of the Spirit' section, the following may be suitable:

- CH4 489 Come down, O love divine
- CH4 615 Holy Spirit, ever living
- CH4 622 We sing a love that sets all people free
- CH4 626 Holy Spirit truth divine (Tunes Canterbury or Capetown may be preferred)
- CH3 329 O Joy, because the circling year or
- CH3 330 Rejoice the year upon its way



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Living Stones](#) is available to pre-order now from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to Dr Paul Middleton for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

