**21st May 2023**

**Call to worship**

Come, for the risen Lord invites you.
Come, for the Holy Spirit seeks you.
Come, for the Creator calls you.
Come to worship.

**A gathering prayer**

Lord Jesus, by your ascension you left our world,
but you did not abandon us.
You promised the Spirit –
who comes to us and makes a home within us,
who reminds us of you,
who guides and protects us
and surrounds us with God’s love.
Help us to be aware of your presence today.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Almighty God, we watch and wait,
we come to share, to know, to learn.
Almighty God, we look and see and fail to see.
Almighty God, we shield our eyes – dare we see?
Almighty God, you were, you are, you will be,
forever and eternity.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Holy God, above and beyond, and yet within us
– how can we not adore you?
Holy God, ready to receive us, to embrace us and enfold us
– how can we not adore you?
Holy God, we do not always understand you,
your being, your power, your love, your guidance,
and yet something within us melds with you,
our belief is there, our faith is there,
because of what we feel and know
and do understand of you.

Our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven
to the confusion of the disciples,
yet you did not leave them, do not leave us,
but are forever within us, before us and behind us.
You are forever urging us on to see the bigger picture,
the wider vision, a greater vista.

Holy God, above and beyond and yet within us
– how can we not adore you?
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

You listen, O God, to our sorrows and our sadness,
to our faltering words and our half-formed understanding
of your way, your truth and your life;
you listen to our confessions, our yearnings and our pleadings
when we acknowledge that we have failed you,
failed others and failed ourselves.
O God, in this moment, in sorrow and in shame,
we offer you our failings and our faults,
knowing that you hear and lift the burden from us.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Heavenly God, you hear our confessions,
you feel our pain,
you sense the way we are disturbed,
and you assure us that we are forgiven.
As in the blink of an eye you wash away our sins
and lift the burdens from us.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

Thank you, O God,
that your wisdom is way beyond our imagining,
for we humans make such a mess of things,
we yearn so often for the here and the now, for the easy ways;
but thank you, God, that you see beyond the here and now
and are not tempted by our easy options.

Thank you that when we set our eyes on the wrong things,
you gently divert our vision to see what you would have us see.

Thank you that when we hear something that sounds more pleasing to us,
your Word remains strong, steadfast and secure
no matter what we do and seek to do.

Thank you for Scriptures that tell your story though the ages,
for the prophets and teachers who bring you to life for us,
who reveal your being to us.

Thank goodness, O God,
that today and every day
you are there, are here, for us.
**Amen.**

**Reading Acts 1.1-14**

**Sermon**

Gone but not forgotten.

The ascension of Jesus is a bit of a handover. It’s like the son who has been working in his father’s business and one day the father comes to the store and says ‘son, I’m not going to be coming in as much anymore; you can handle things here.’ It was a day the son knew was coming, but could he handle it? Could he keep up the things that his father had begun?

Penelope Shuttle’s poem ‘Outgrown’, dedicated to her daughter Zoe, is included in Carol Ann Duffy’s anthology *Empty Nest: Poems for Families* (Picador, 2021). It tells of a mother folding up and packing away her daughter’s clothes and shoes that she has now outgrown. The mother also feels outgrown by the daughter who now towers over her. This realization of outgrowing and growing up is a turning point for both mother and daughter, ‘because just as I work out how to be a mother/she stops being a child’. The poem leaves its readers wondering how much is actually outgrown, and how much remains unchanged

In the film Nanny McPheee with Emma Thompson and Colin Firth, Nanny McPhee is employed to look after some badly behaved children. Obviously they don’t like her at first and scheme to get rid of her. She’s on to them very quickly and one of the first things she says to them is: ‘when you need me but you don’t want me, then I have to stay. When you want me but don’t need me, then I won’t be there for you’.

The parallel is not exact with Jesus for we believe he is always here for us. Imagine how the disciples must have felt when they knew had to leave them ‘when they wanted him but didn’t need him’.

Here, Jesus is making the handover to the disciples. This was the critical moment if the disciples were to fulfil Jesus plan. The disciples understood that if the work of Jesus was to go on, it would be up to them to do it. The body of Christ on earth was no, longer Jesus physical body, but the corporate body of believers. This remains true for us today.

Teresa of Avila a 16th century saint wrote:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ’s compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, yours are the hands with which he is to bless... now’

The handover comes with the reassuring knowledge that we know the one who sits at the right hand of God and he knows us! In those times of life when all we can see is the muck and mire of daily existence, and when it seems that all life has to offer is one problem after another, we can lift our eyes. To believe in the ascension of Jesus is to believe that the one who is truly in charge of all life is God, the Creator, redeemer and sustainers of life. For those early Christians, as they undertook the mission to continue to spread the good news about Jesus, there must have been many times when they felt at their wits end and overwhelmed by the challenges at hand. In those times, it must have been a great comfort to remind themselves that they knew –and were known by – the one sitting at the right hand of God. And so it is for us.

If the disciples were to undertake this mission what were they to do? What help could they receive. Jesus had promised that they would be filled with power of the Holy Spirit but they had to wait.

Waiting is not our strong suit. In our fast food, high speed ‘don’t just sit there, do something’ age, waiting is not something we do well. Waiting is too passive; we prefer to be active, taking charge. Waiting is the acknowledgement that we are not in control.

William Willimon says ‘our waiting implies that the things which need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort. Some other empowerment is needed.’

The disciples knew that without some help- they could not undertake the task of being Christ’s witnesses. So they waited for power to come. But their waiting was not empty time. It was filled with prayer. Some may argue that they could have spent their time more productively. They could have taken charge – planning, organising and getting things in order. Instead they prayed. For the disciples at that critical moment, prayer was the only use of their time... it served as a reminder of God’s presence and power in their lives. Prayer was a reminder that it was God’s will, not their own, which they were seeking. Which is a lesson we all need to learn. How often do we set out on some well intentioned project without first getting our proper bearings?

Last week John in his gospel has Jesus using the word paraclete in Greek to describe the Holy Spirit. It could be translated into English as the Comforter, the counsellor, the helper, or the advocate. Thosew different words bring out different aspects of the person of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s work in our lives.

In this passage Jesus talks about baptising his followers in the Holy Spirit and that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them to be his witnesses.

The Greek word baptizo was used in pre Christian Greek. It meant to immerse and was used literally of scuppering a ship, sinking in the mud, and in the passive ‘to perish’, ‘to be overwhelmed’.

The most common use of it in the New Testament speaks of initial conversion, beginning the Christian life, leaving the old and starting the new life with Christ. Baptism is not to be seen as a bare external rite. The bible is full of attacks on the merely outward. Baptism includes the idea of sonship, entry into the kingdom, or incorporation into Christ, of reception of his Spirit, of justification (being in a right relationship to God).

Sometimes one word is used; sometimes another, but the whole complex belongs together. There are three strands which taken together make a person a Christian. There is the human side – repentance and faith. There is the divine side – reception of the Spirit, adoption into the family of God, forgiveness of sins, justification. There is the churchy side – baptism into the body of believers. All three belong together and are the necessary parts of initiation. As you read Acts of the Apostles you get all these three stages coming in different orders in time just so that those who like tidy theological schemes will be disappointed.

Pentecostalists and Charismatic’s have of course argued for a second experience, or blessing of the Holy Spirit. They have invariably called this the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They usually see the ability to speak in tongues as evidence of this. For me I think this is an inaccurate use of biblical terms and can confuse people and can contribute to division among the one people of the Spirit.

I well remember being at university and mixing with all sorts of young Christians from all sorts of backgrounds. Some from the Pentecostal side where urging me to be baptised in the Holy Spirit. I prayed desperately for God to do this but to no avail. Looking back I knew my motives for having such an experience were flawed – it was about keeping up appearances and trying to be seen as super spiritual.

In Acts 5.32 there is a very suggestive saying. That verse speaks of the Spirit ‘whom God has given to those who obey him’. This has in it the great truth that the measure of the spirit which a person can possess is conditioned by the kind of person they are. It means that the person who is honestly and humbly trying to do the will of God will experience more and more of the wonder of the Spirit. It means the living of the Christian life brings with it its own power.

However there is a reality behind our awkward use of expressions such as baptised with the Holy Spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit. It is tragic that many Christians have robbed themselves of blessing because they have distrusted, feared or despised the Pentecostal and charismatic movement. We can be satisfied with a low level of spirituality. We can prevent God from releasing us in prayer and praise and personal relationships; releasing us from the imprisonment of age long inhibitions and prejudices, We can get into the low expectations of not expecting to see God at work in conversions, in changing tough lives, in healing, in explicit guidance. We can be content to stay in lukewarm waters terrified to launch out into the deep experience of God.

In her book Tramp for the Lord, Corrie Ten Boom tells about an experience she had during her travels after World War II. During the war she was imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck. There in that camp her sister died in the gas ovens.

After the war was over she became an evangelist telling people about God’s powerful forgiving love. On one such occasion she was in Germany and after the sermon she greeted many people who were in the audience. A man came forward to shake her hand. Suddenly for Corri Ten Boom there was a flash of recognition as she identified him as one of the prison guards who had stood watch at the doors to the ovens were so many people including her sister were killed. Memories of that terrible time came flooding over her. The pain, the suffering, the grief. This is what she wrote:

‘I fumbled in my pocket rather than take his hand. My blood seemed to freeze. I knew I had to forgive if I wanted to receive God’s forgiveness, still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart’.

She began to pray. She knew that she could not find the power to forgive, but she could at least raise her hand. Slowly she took his hand and when she did a rush of genuine forgiveness came over her. She said to him ‘I forgive you brother’. As she tells it ‘for a long moment we grasped each other’s hand, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, but did not have the power’.

How did she do that? What was the source of the power that enabled her to shake the hand and to forgive her former enemy? Of course it was the Holy Spirit working within her.

Is our experience of the Spirit a plunging under the waters, an inundation of God, a vitality produced by him that could cause folk to wonder if we were drunk? Have we that power in prayer, that strength over temptation, that growing Christ likeness, which marked the communities of Christ in the New Testament and of which the one baptism was the outward bond.

The early Reformers spoke of improving on their baptism, by which they meant ensuring that they had the reality as well as the symbol. It is to this full surrender to the Lord who is the Spirit, this openness to the Spirit sweeping through our lives that is associated with the baptism in the Spirit and the power of the Spirit.

David Wilkerson was an American evangelist best known for his book and the film Cross and the Switchblade.

He felt the [Holy Spirit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Spirit) move him with compassion, he was drawn to go to New York in February 1958. It was then that he began a street ministry to young [drug addicts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Substance_dependence) and [gang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gang#Gang_violence) members, which he continued into the 1960s. He died in 2011 after he was involved in a car accident. Rev. Wilkerson's last blog post stated the following: "To those going through the valley and shadow of death, hear this word: Weeping will last through some dark, awful nights," he wrote, "and in that darkness you will soon hear the Father whisper, `I am with you. I cannot tell you why right now, but one day it will all make sense. You will see it was all part of my plan. It was no accident."

Graham Pulkingham was a liberal priest in the Episcopalian church of the United States. he felt powerless in the face of the depressed condition of the church and his neighborhood and of his longing for a deeper experience of God. He tells of how he met David Wilkerson and went with him to a home for rescued prostitutes which David’s organization looked after. ‘It was here that I received the power of the Holy Spirit. Dave Wilkerson told me to kneel down. I knelt and they came across the room hurriedly. When their hands touched my head something inside of me leapt with gladness, and even the unusual manner of their prayer was not offensive. Almost immediately all awareness of the men and their prayers, of the room and even of myself was obliterated by the immense presence of God’s power. He was unmistakably there, and my inner response was like the clatter of a bamboo wind chime in a gale. The very foundations of my soul shook violently. He bowed low before the greatness of God, and wept at his own unworthiness.

That is how Graham Pulkingham described the experience of God which revolutionised his Christian life,. There followed a new gladness, a new power in ministry, in healing, in preaching, a liberty in prayer and worship, a crossing of denominational boundaries and a wonderful experiment in community living.

The Spirit was the source of day to day courage and power. Courage to meet dangerous situations; the Christian power to cope with life more adequately. The Christian eloquence when eloquence is needed; the Christian joy which was independent of circumstances are all alike ascribed to the work of the Hoy spirit.

In the first 13 chapters of the Acts there are more than forty references to the Holy Spirit. The early church was a spirit filled church and precisely therein lay its power.

The challenge that was given to the disciples at the ascension was: don’t get fixated on Christ’s going but prepare for his return by fulfilling his mission. In other words, when things change don’t get lost in the past. It is something we must all learn post-Covid. We need to discover new ways of being church. Yes, adjustment is not always comfortable, but the ministry of the ‘comforter’ is not to soothe us, but to encourage and strengthen us in our calling. We need to determine what to let go, what to adapt and what to do new. The Spirit, Jesus’ leaving gift to us, will supply the wisdom and courage for that task.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, the disciples gathered to wait just as you instructed; their constant prayers rising to you in Glory. We cannot physically see you, but our hearts are yours and, as we await your return, we constantly lift our hearts to you in prayer. Gone from sight but not forgotten. Never forgotten.

Lord, we need you.
**Our world needs you, Lord.**

There is much unrest, our world a battlefield of light and darkness. Wars and conflicts are tearing it apart. We pray for Ukraine as they gather more arms with which to defend themselves against Russia. We pray for Israel and Sudan. And all involved in the ravages of war and unrest.

Lord, we need you.
**Our world needs you, Lord.**

We pray for all those displaced, having fled to safety but missing home and loved ones. We pray for the children in Bangladesh, growing up in the world’s largest refugee camp. Their life is one of illness, hunger and squalor. We pray for all those unable to flee and living amid bombing - dreading the sirens and wondering where the next strike will hit. Lord, we ask for an end to all wars and unrest. Blanket the world with your peace.

Lord, we need you.
**Our world needs you, Lord.**

Selfishness and greed are rife and destroying all that is good. Many are still lost, Lord, filling gaps in their lives with selfish wants and destructive desires. They look after number one with no thought for others. We pray for all victims and bystanders hurt by the actions of others. Only you can fill the gap in peoples’ lives, Lord and truly satisfy. Many are searching for you, Lord without knowing it. Deal with those who are hurting. Heal addictions. Fill the void with your powerful, life-giving, refreshing Spirit.

Lord, we need you.
**Our world needs you, Lord.**

You told your disciples they would be witnesses to the ends of the earth. We pray for all who venture into the mission field. We pray for all leaders and teachers of your Word, wherever they share the gospel. We pray for churches everywhere. May they be beacons of truth and wisdom, shining a light into the darkness of bewildering confusion. We are not all called to be evangelists but each person following you can shine your light. Unite us and help us, your church, to live a life of witness.

Lord, we need you.
**Our world needs you, Lord.**

This nation is in turmoil at present. The government have yet to bring an end to the strikes. Railway staff and nurses are planning more strikes causing further disruption to people’s lives. There was a promise to reduce hospital waiting lists but the strikes are lengthening them. Solve disputes, Lord.

We pray for our economy. Businesses are facing impact by the tourist tax; others by the difficulty getting parts for manufacture, which in turn threatens many more jobs in various sectors. All of which has a further detrimental effect on the economy.

Debt charities are seeing record numbers seeking help due to constantly rising prices in all areas. We pray for all dreading the weekly shop. Grocery prices are being looked at as supermarkets come under the spotlight. We pray for fair deals for suppliers and shoppers.

We pray for our government, that truth will be upheld and promises kept. Lord, guide all in power with your wisdom. May the voices of those who follow you be heard in the corridors of power. And your light of wisdom shine in the darkest recesses.

Lord, we need you.
**Our world needs you, Lord.**

Many of our communities came together to celebrate the coronation weekend. We pray that unity will continue. But there is still a need for more people to reach out: to the lonely, the hungry, those struggling to look after loved ones and have little idea of where to turn.

We pray for young children robbed of their childhood because of needing to help care for siblings or parents. We pray for children addicted to social media and gaming, spending hours in front of a screen with little or no family time. We pray for the neglected and abused.

Lord, we pray for our communities. Bring families together. Refresh the weary. Bless the despondent with renewed hope. Look down upon us with your love and compassion.

Lord, we need you.
**Our world needs you, Lord.**

May we live in unity as we await your return. Gone but not forgotten. Lord, we rejoice in you. We wait. We pray.

Awesome, powerful, Lord, in your mercy,
**hear our prayer. Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Jesus is risen. **Alleluia**.
Jesus is ascended. **Amen.**
Jesus sent his Spirit. **Alleluia.**
Jesus is here. His Spirit is with us.
Thanks be to God! **Alleluia! Amen!**



**A sending out prayer**

Send us out, O Lord,
waiting expectantly for your Spirit,
looking for signs of your presence with us,
looking for signs of your work in action.
Support us, strengthen us, establish us,
now and in all the weeks to come,
that we may show your glory,
and know your blessing and peace.
**Amen.**