

Pentecost Reading: Acts 2

Leader's reflection

In many ways there is no better evidence for the Christian truth than the existence of the Church after two millennia. Yes, it has gone wrong at times, wildly wrong on occasion, but it started somewhere, for some reason, and is here with us now.

Something must have happened to change the disciples. When we see them at the end of the Gospels (pick one, any one; honestly they are hopeless in all of them), they are in pieces. They are hiding away, with no idea what to do, no plan. In all likelihood, they will return to whatever they were doing before they came to follow the man they thought was the Messiah. Even after they have seen Jesus, they are a small contained group. In Acts 1 they meet together to pray and to choose a replacement for Judas, but nothing beyond that. They are not as hopeless as they were at the end of the Gospels, but still not the transformed people who will start a movement which will change the world.

The word Pentecost has become so tied up with this event that it couldn't possibly be to do with anything else. But the day of Pentecost was originally a Jewish festival, which took place 50 days after Passover. On it the Jewish people celebrated the Law being given to Moses, and God opening a new way of life for them. In this way, it is another example, alongside Passover, of a festival being taken and re-shaped by God to give a new message to the people. This is why there are people from all over the world in Jerusalem, with many languages being spoken.

In the Old Testament, Pentecost signaled a way of life being given to the Jewish people through the Law. In the New Testament, a new way of life is being given to all people, through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that this new way of life is given, and by which the followers of Jesus are transformed.



In Acts 1:12-end, we see the followers of Jesus as a holy huddle, praying together. Yes, there were some things that were different about them. They met men and women together, they prayed privately together rather than at the temple or synagogue. These things in themselves should not be discounted as being important. They show an awareness that things are different, that Jesus has made a difference.

In Acts 2, the true transformation happens. The Holy Spirit is given to them, He comes as a rushing wind, and tongues of flame appear. You get the impression that the writer is struggling to relate something really profound about what happened, but can't quite describe it. They burst onto the street babbling away, and being understood. This in itself is a sign that the world has changed, that the curse of Babel in Genesis 11, is being reversed. It is a sign that the work of the world being put right has begun, and gives us a window into the wider impact that Jesus has on all of creation.

Peter, filled with boldness, speaks of what is happening. Unsurprisingly in the context he is speaking, he uses large chunks of the Old Testament to explain what is happening, and more importantly, what it shows. The people are amazed, but also fearful. Peter has told them that Jesus is the Messiah, that God has acted through Him, and that the people need to respond. The old ways are no longer good enough, they need to accept the new way.

And many do. Many are baptised. The holy huddle that met in the upper room has been transformed. They want people to join them, to come to know Jesus, and to join this new community.

This new community is different. People are equals. There is no priesthood and laity. They share what they have. They are thankful for what they have been given. They are a people still living in an occupied country, ruled over by foreigners, but *they* are different. And because of them, 2000 years later, we are here to continue to celebrate together, to support and love one another, and to grow in faith together.



Aim To see the difference the Holy Spirit made to the disciples.

Main points to cover

1. This is the beginning of the Church, of which our churches are a part. This is our history.
2. The change in the apostles between before and after the event.
3. The fact that the Holy Spirit who made this possible is alive and well and able to help us in our lives.

Focus On Why the Holy Spirit is given to us.

Activity ideas

Exploring the story. Split the young people into groups and give them a large piece of paper. On one side ask them to write "BEFORE". As they read Acts 1:9-11 encourage them to write down on the paper words they think describe the group at this point. Help them to explore ideas of them being insular, quiet, keeping themselves to themselves and not causing a fuss. On the other side of the paper get them to write AFTER and as they read Acts 2:4-14 and 41-47 write down words that describe the group through these readings. What are the key differences between before and after? Explore the idea that it is the Holy Spirit who makes the difference.

Why was the Holy Spirit given? Looking at the differences between before and after, ask the young people why they think the Spirit was given to the disciples. Explore the idea that the Spirit is given to help us to show the world how good God is and how good what He has to offer us is. Encourage them to think of ways that the Holy Spirit can help them to show their world how good God is. Follow this with an encouragement for the young people to pray out loud for the person on their left, and then the person on their right

Peter heals miraculously
Reading: Acts 3

Leader's reflection

In this reading we see the start of the purpose for which the Spirit was given to the Church. Peter and John are on their way to the temple. At the gates of the temple beggars used to sit to take alms from those gathered to worship. This seems a very sensible place to sit, as they would be able to prick the conscience of those going to pray and worship. Imagine walking past them on your way to the temple, and wondering if you ignored them, were you living as a good Jew should?

The man lame from birth spent his days there. He was brought by his friends, and would have been taken home at the end of the day. When he sees Peter and John entering the temple complex, he asks for help from them. They do not throw him some coins. They don't awkwardly walk past him trying not to look at him. They call him to look at them. Then Peter shows how different things are for them now. The power that they have been given in the Spirit is such a part of who they are, that Peter seems to think nothing of healing the man. He doesn't even ask if he wants to be healed.

There is something interesting about the words that Peter uses which marks a distinct change from the healing of Jesus. Where Jesus would simply have commanded the man to get up and walk, Peter points to where the healing power comes from. "In the name of Jesus Christ...get up and walk." Peter makes it clear that this healing is not from him but from Him.

What happens next is the real point of Acts 3. The healing is not just about one changed life, but as a means to give glory to God, and through that glory, to draw others to him.



People are amazed by what has happened. It was only a few weeks since Jesus was healing in the city, and now here are two men who have healed too. This may be why Peter is so quick to make sure they understand properly what has happened. He doesn't want them to follow him, but to know Jesus. And so, through explaining what has happened, Peter lays out before the witnesses the Good News of Jesus. Because of who he talking to, he frames it in terms of the Old Testament. He explains that Jesus is the fulfilment of the story of redemption which threads through all of scripture. The words he uses are important. The formal sounding, "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", is a quote from Exodus 3, when Moses is sent by God. By doing this, he places Jesus as a central part of the Jewish faith and promise. The Jews should turn to Jesus because He is the one they have been waiting for.

Often when we talk about God, we start talking about one thing and end up talking about another. When we speak of God as creator we end up speaking of God as love. When we speak of God as powerful, we end up speaking of God's tenderness. When Peter starts speaking of God as healer, he ends up speaking of God as redeemer. Because ultimately, that should be where all our conversations about God end up.

Aim

Explore how the power of Jesus is still present, but in a slightly different way.

Main points to cover

1. God is still healing people even though Jesus has ascended.
2. The Apostles want to make sure that God is given the glory for what takes place.
3. The apostles want to make sure that people are aware WHY God is doing these things: as a sign of the power of Jesus and his saving power.

Focus On

As Christians our strength is not in ourselves, but is in God, and how this contrasts with the world.



Activity ideas

Differences between Jesus and Peter. Look at two different healing stories, John 5:1-9 and this one from Acts. Ask the young people to pick out the similarities and differences between them. Maybe split them into two groups and get one to look at the similarities and the other the differences. Come back together and discuss them. While summing this up emphasise the differences between what Jesus and Peter said.

Looking outside ourselves for the answers. Gather a few examples of the sort of internet wisdom that is circulated widely on social media. Look in particular for ones which speak about finding answers to our problems by looking deep inside ourselves. Ask the young people to look at these ideas and consider what might be wrong about thinking this way. Ask them if they can think about how the words of Peter when healing the beggar have anything to do with these. Explore with them how Peter points outside himself, to God for the answers and power, whereas many things point inside ourselves for the answers.

Prayer. If possible find an old set of weighing scales, of the sort with two sides which are balanced against one another with weights. If you can't find one, a picture will do. If you have an actual one, use it to illustrate the point. We can try and carry all our worries and problems by ourselves. The world tells us that we should be able to carry this stuff. God shows us a different way, where He wants to help us carry our load. Illustrate this by putting a weight on one side of the scales. The scales will be unbalanced. God isn't merely strong enough to balance our worries, but is strong enough to help us carry our burdens completely. Illustrate this by putting a much large weight on the other side of the scales. Give the young people a chance to draw or make something which represents some of their worries and stresses. Have them place them on one side of the scale, and balance it against the weight on the other side. Pray over these things.



Arrest and escape Reading: Acts 5:12-end

Leader's reflection

So much happens in this reading. It is an up and down drama, which seems it could end badly at several points. It starts by placing this story in the context of many amazing signs and wonders happening around the people who follow Jesus. Men and women are part of this community, separating this movement from the highly segregated patterns in wider society. You get the impression that this was an incredible time to be part of this community.

But here we come to our first dramatic pause. The high priest can no longer stand idly by while a movement begins right underneath his nose. He has the apostles arrested.

And here God acts openly. He sends an angel to open the prison door. But instead of escaping to safety, the apostles are instructed to go and stand in the temple and tell the people about this life.

This life. That's how the faith is described at this point. Not merely a code of behaviour, not merely a way to live. It is a way of living which moves our centre of gravity. We are no longer at the centre of our world, but God is. That is what is at the centre of *this life*.

Because they are obedient, they listen and go to preach in the temple. They must have been nervous, but God had already stepped into the story.

Meanwhile the Sanhedrin, the governing body, is convened. Here there are echoes of the Easter story, when an illegal Sanhedrin is called to convict Jesus. They send the police to fetch the apostles from the Temple, but find they are gone. So the temple police are sent to bring the apostles before the council from wherever they are. Once again, this could all go wrong for the apostles.



The Sanhedrin are outraged. The apostles have gone directly against what they were ordered to do, and are filling Jerusalem with the teaching of Jesus. Here Peter's words are significant. When he says, "The God of our fathers," he is making it explicitly clear that this is not some new god. This is not some new religion. This is part of the Jewish faith of which the Sanhedrin are a part. His language is emotive. He accuses the Sanhedrin of murder, only weeks after the events of Easter. The Sanhedrin are furious. They want to have them killed.

But here the unexpected happens again. Gamaliel, one of the most respected Rabbi's of his time, and the teacher of Saul/Paul, stands up to speak. He was a man who knew the law inside out and back to front. He was widely honoured and respected as a man of God.

So does he call for the killing of the apostles? Does he call for the followers of Jesus to be wiped out? No. He argues eloquently that the Sanhedrin must stand aside. If Jesus was a man, then this would all die out in time. If, however, God was in this new movement, then the Sanhedrin must not work against it. If they do, they will find themselves working against God. This would have put the Sanhedrin, the Jewish nobility, in alliance with the many nations which had stood against Israel in it's history. It would have been a sobering moment.

So it all ends well? Better than expected certainly. The apostles are flogged and instructed not to speak of Jesus any further. How do the apostles react? They celebrate. They have been dishonoured in the eyes of the world because of their beliefs. The persecution which Jesus spoke about is taking place because they are faithful to His teaching. Do they stop? No. They continue to teach throughout Jerusalem, proclaiming Jesus is the way.



Aim The bravery and trust the disciples have in what they are instructed to do.

Main points to cover

1. This could have gone wrong at many points for the disciples.
2. The disciples are obedient and faithful to what God instructs them to do.
3. The disciples celebrate that they are treated badly because they have stood up for their faith.

Focus On How the disciples reacted when they were told to do things that seem strange.

Activity ideas

What happens next? Write the story down in chunks, ending at some of the cliffhanger parts. Tell the story in as exciting a way as possible. At each of the pauses, have the young people think about what will happen next and get them to make suggestions. To make it more active, have them move to different parts of the room to agree with certain options. Once at the end of the story, ask the young people to choose a word or two to describe the disciples and the way they reacted to what was happening in the story. Again, to make it more active, place pieces of paper with these words on around the room for them to move to. Spend some time exploring why they have chosen the words they have.

Why did the disciples do what they did? Go back to each of the parts of the story you ended at. Ask the young people if the disciples did the obvious thing or not. Why was this? Explore the idea that the disciples trusted in God, and that He had a plan for how this was all going to work out.

And they celebrated, because they had been dishonoured in the eyes of the world for the sake of Jesus. Success is a strange thing, which looks different for each of us. The world tells us that success is a fat bank account, a nice house and a family. This story tells us that success for the disciples was very different. Encourage the young people to explore their ideas of what success looks like. Have a look again at v41 and the disciples response to what happened to them. Get the young people to write down how they see success, and how it is different. If they feel ready, spend some time talking this through, and pray that God would help us to see success as He sees it, not as we, or the world, see it.

Helping others Reading: Acts 6:1-7

Leader's reflection

In this reading we see what, on the surface, is a practical, slightly boring, account of the apostles working out how what was mentioned in Acts 2 actually works. If you have a large number of people who have shared all that they have with one another, you need a practical way to feed everyone. After all, they are one big family. In this slightly boring pragmatism though, God's Spirit is equally as present as in the stories of miracles and prison escape.

The Hellenistic Jews are being missed in the daily sharing of the food. This is a problem from a practical point of view, people need food to function after all, but it speaks of a deeper problem. Within the group of believers there was an equality. The community of believers, however, is made up of men and women who are treated equally in contrast to the society at the time. Another kind of inequality needs to be addressed.

The over-looking of a particular group in something as essential as giving out food shows us that the community was not the ideal in the way many would like to think of the early church. It speaks of a hierarchy of members, with members from certain ethnic backgrounds being less valued than others. So what begins as a practical, slightly dull reading, actually speaks of the practical working out of a belief about people.

We know from Church that often we deal with practical issues in different ways to "spiritual" ones. We can spend a lot of time in prayer and reflection on matters such as what we teach, how we worship, how we help people to develop a deeper spiritual life. When it comes to things such as coffee rotas, community meals, sides-people, or other more practical things, we don't. This can show us of certain assumptions from wider society that we have bought into; That there are spiritual



and practical jobs, that there is a sacred secular divide. That there are certain jobs which are more important than others.

This reading shows us that this way of thinking was alien to the early Church. What is their reaction to realising that there is a problem? The Twelve bring the community together and speak to them. We can read all sorts of things into the texts that aren't there. Yes, they say it wouldn't be right for them to give up preaching to manage financial matters. But they don't place a value on either of those roles that makes one better than another. How can we be so sure of this? They ask the community to bring forward seven men (equality might not be quite worked out perfectly yet), of good reputation "Full of the Spirit." They understand that this is a spiritual role, as well as a practical one. There is more evidence for this. They have the seven come and stand before the apostles who lay their hands on them and pray for them in this work.

Where do we lay hands on people to commission them into work? When they are doing 'spiritual' work. When did the early Church lay hands on people? When they recognised that God was in the work the people were doing. Too often we divide the world into that which is acceptable to God and that which isn't. That work which is more focused on God and that which isn't. Let's try and recognise that there is no sacred/secular divide. That the whole world is the Lord's, and that practical work is just as acceptable to him as the Spiritual. When we recognise that this divide is completely fabricated, it changes the way we see our everyday lives, it changes the way we see roles and jobs both in and out of our Churches, and it means that we begin to work for God in all things, and therefore worship Him in all things.



Aim To explore how being part of Church means that we have a wider family to take care of and to take care of us.

Main points to cover

1. The Church wanted to help all of its members to be taken care of.
2. They recognised that the “practical” work was just as important as the “spiritual” work.
3. In our Churches we need to take care of everyone and value each others work

Focus On Recognising that all gifts are given by God to help those around us

Activity ideas

Split the young people into three groups. Give each group one word written on a piece of paper from the list: Family, Church, Community. Ask each group to define their word, ensuring that the other groups don't hear it. Give them a few minutes to define the word, then take away their piece of paper, give them a fresh one, and give them one of the other words to define. Repeat this until all three groups have had all three words. Come back together as a large group, and put each of their definitions at the front. See first of all if they can pick out similarities between the definitions of Family and Community, then see if they can pick out any similarities between those and their definitions of church. Explain that a lot of the time we have bought into the idea that the church should only be bothered about religious ideas, but that that is an idea that is relatively recent, and for most of its history the Church was deeply and meaningfully involved in the everyday life of people throughout the world. Alternative: as a simpler activity, you could have a list of everyday activities and read them out one at a time to the group, and get them to put them into one of two lists: Church and Not Church, depending on whether they think it is something the church should be involved with or bothered with. The same point flows out of that activity.



Who are the widows and orphans today? To explore this idea you will first need to give some background as to why the church felt it needed to serve widows and orphans in the first place. Explain that during the first century, women and children were not really seen as full members of society. Men mattered, and women and children were completely reliant on husbands/fathers for their wellbeing. If a family had no father or husband, or lost their father/husband through some accident, then the widow and children from that family had nothing to protect them in society. They could be treated in any way by the people around them, with no recourse to the law or wider society. They were the lowest of the low, and the church saw this and wanted to do something about it. Indeed, there is evidence that as much as two thirds of the early church was made up of women, because they were treated as fully human, rather than objects. Once you have explained this, ask the young people if this means that we should look after widows and orphans today? Explain that our society is different and, though there is still a way to go, women and children are treated as full members of society. This means that we need to think about who the widows and orphans are in our society; who are the people who have no one else to stand with them? Who are not treated as full members of society? Spend some time thinking about this, both as a wider issue in our country, but also a local issue for your context.

So how can we help? With your young people spend some time thinking about how you could do something to help those groups you have identified as modern day widows and orphans. Could you do some fundraising? What about giving time to volunteer? It is important to explore these ideas as ideas for now with the young people, to help them see that they are full members of the church, rather than members in waiting. For many young people, the experience of helping to do something practical for those who have little, can be profound, and really help them see how God is active in the world today, as well as seeing how their faith can have an impact on the people around them. Make a plan to put the ideas into action, so they don't just stay as ideas but become a reality.

