

## **Pentecost May 2024**

A great celebration today, the birthday, the beginning of the Church, at Pentecost. The story from Acts paints a picture of amazing power, an overwhelming supernatural experience for the disciples and others present as God's Holy Spirit comes down on them like flames of fire. It changes their lives for ever. There's almost a dangerous feel to it, with fire and noise and stormy winds. In today's gospel, at the end of the Last Supper, Jesus assures the disciples that despite the horror of what was about to happen, his arrest and crucifixion, he will not leave them on their own. He will send the Spirit, his Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, to give them all they will need, to lead them into complete truth.

That same Spirit is with us today. We may not see flames of fire or experience the building rocking, but God pours out his Spirit on us and on all Christians, today and every day. And it is a dangerous Spirit, because it changes our lives, it can change our world and it will lead us in directions we might not want to go. But it is God's Spirit and it gives us everything we will need to follow Jesus, to do what God wants us to do.

Today, 19<sup>th</sup> May, is also St Dunstan's day. As always, saints days are dropped on a Sunday and you may not know much about Dunstan. He's been part of my life since a child as my home church, where I first went to Sunday school and sang in the choir, was St Dunstan's in Cheam, in south west London. And he's quite an intriguing person. He was born around the year 900 and lived at Glastonbury. He was educated, an artist, a musician and also a metal worker, so a blacksmith. He didn't want to be a monk or a priest, but others saw in him a vocation and great potential. He did become a monk, then abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Glastonbury and then Archbishop of Canterbury in 960. But because he clashed with a new young king, Edwy and he had to flee the country and escape to – guess where? The Benedictine abbey of St Peter's in Ghent!

On his return he became a much loved archbishop of Canterbury, reforming the Church but also fearless in challenging the king and his advisors if he felt they were wrong. I've always had an image of Dunstan as a blokey sort of bloke who didn't really want to be a priest or a bishop, but in the end did what he felt God was calling him to do. Maybe that's a bit of projection there from me.

So why think about Dunstan today as we celebrate Pentecost? Well reading more about Dunstan when I was on retreat in March, I was struck by the links not only with my life and St Dunstan's, Cheam, but his links and ours with St Peter's Ghent and the close friendship we have there. Fr Jurgen and others from St Peter's will be visiting us again in September and we give thanks for our friendship and ecumenical ties, as Catholics and Anglicans, Christians together.

And one more connection. I celebrated a birthday a couple of weeks ago – I was 68. I know, you can't believe it – nor can I. And today, on this feast of Pentecost and St Dunstan's day, I'm sharing some important news with you all. As we prepare for our annual meeting straight after mass, I want to let you know that I will be retiring in October, 6 months from now. I know that might be a surprise to some, but I also

know some of you have been talking and asking about it for some time. I have already shared it with wardens, church council and ministry team – just in case they all decided to step down today! And at 68, it's not such a surprise really. Rona and I have prayed and planned for some time and this autumn, after celebrating 40 years since I was ordained and 12 years here with you at St Mary's, it feels the right time.

I will say it's not an easy decision to make and in some ways it's not easy to announce. Should I have told you sooner? Should I have waited till later? Well, for better or worse, now you know. As we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost, we know that God will continue to bless and guide his family here, as he has done for centuries. And Mary's prayers for this church, dedicated in her name, will continue too, along with the prayers of all the angels and saints. Bishop Christopher, the archdeacon, area dean and the new bishop of Woolwich, not yet announced, will help and guide you. And this church has always had strong leaders, as you do today, with others to be chosen at our annual meeting after mass. All this seemed to say today, the day of Pentecost, is the right time to share this with you.

And let's be clear: I'm not ill; I'm not unhappy: I'm not dead yet! And we have 6 more months, 6 busy months, to work together on planning the future, St Mary's future, to develop our vision for this church and how we bring God's love to this community. And I hope, 6 months of celebration and thanksgiving, perhaps the occasional party. And 6 months of getting on with the job, the job Jesus has called us to do, in following him in Faith, Hope and Love. That has happened here for over 1000 years. It's happened in the Church since that first Pentecost. And it will continue, here and throughout the world, because we are God's children, called to do his work.

We don't actually know where we'll be moving to in October. We haven't yet got a permanent place. But at least for a few months we'll be in Liverpool, where we have a small flat. When we know more, we'll let you know too – so I won't be running off with the church silver!

Today we celebrate this great feast of Pentecost, the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on his people, as true today as 2000 years ago. We give thanks for the life of St Dunstan and our patron, Mary, the mother of the Lord. And we pray for our church leaders and ministry team and those to be elected today.

'If you are led by the Spirit, nothing will harm you; for the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, trustfulness, gentleness'.

Jesus said 'I shall send you from the Father the Spirit of truth, who will lead you into complete truth'.

Fr Steve.