

Sunday 31st May 2020 Livestreamed, Grahamstown 9.30 a.m.		Day of Pentecost - Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Day 66 of COVID19 lockdown
Acts 2:1-21	Ps 104:26-36	1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 John 20:19-23
Come, Holy Spirit		

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:21-22)

PENTECOST

We gather in worship on a highly significant day in our lives, as Christians, as people of faith, and as South Africans. Today is the Day of Pentecost: the day when the Spirit is poured out on all believers. Our prayer on this day is “Come, Holy Spirit of God.” The Day of Pentecost is also the final day in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and so we pray for all Christian churches, for unity and for love. And it is a National Day of Prayer for South Africa, when we join together to pray for the healing of our land and the protection of our people.

In a recent letter from our daughter Nicola, currently in the USA, describes the signs of spring. She writes: “As of literally yesterday, the leaves have popped on the trees! Vulnerable, unfolding, uncurling, fresh, bright, tentative,

yellow-green leaves. The whole landscape looks completely different, turning green rather than grey. What a beautiful, unexpected sight.” She is encountering new life and unexpected gifts, tiny miracles, wherever she looks.

The Day of Pentecost is such a time and season. Our first reading (Acts 2:1-12) tells of the experience of those first disciples: wind from heaven, tongues of fire and flame, the many languages, the exhilaration, the good news spreading like a fire. Things were never the same again. That first Pentecost was a new beginning. The church was born. Their lives were turned upside down. From having been a frightened and uncertain group of people, the disciples moved into the streets, out of hiding, to proclaim and live out the good news that they had found in Jesus. The living Lord, they knew, now lived in them. They had received power from God. From then on, they were able to demonstrate this new reality of the love of God, in works and words of power and life and healing. A springtime of new life and hope. Unexpected gifts. Miracles large and small. Doors formerly closed, now opening. New possibilities. Lives changed. People set free. Filled with God’s love. The old grey world a thing of the past. And with this springtime, relationships were transformed, a new community emerged, and old historic barriers of race and language began to melt away.

Pentecost is for us a time and a season of new life and power. We invite the Holy Spirit to fill us and make us new. Our prayer is that God will give us the power and

courage and strength to do His will. “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me, Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.”

REOPENING OF CHURCH BUILDINGS

As SA moves into Level 3 of lockdown, so much remains uncertain. We are feeling our way into an unknown future. We face tomorrow with mixed feelings. Schools will begin to reopen. We hold Grade 7s and Grade 12s, and their teachers, in our love and prayers as they return tomorrow. There is both excitement and anxiety. We shall be allowed to move around more freely. But things are getting more dangerous and riskier as the country opens up.

There has been much discussion as to what the life of the church, and our society, should be like, in the time ahead, and we move into Level 3 of lockdown. It seems that half the country is jumping up and down about the sale of alcohol and cigarettes; and the other half is jumping up and down about the reopening of our church buildings for worship!

The announcement by the President that church buildings may be reopened for worship as from tomorrow, 1st June, has been received with mixed feelings. Some are delighted. We can meet again. We can gather for worship again. And there is no doubt that many have greatly missed coming to church. But others – and I include myself here - are cautious. There is concern that we are moving too quickly,

and that it would be unwise to reopen now.

Your Churchwardens and PCC are looking carefully at what is needed and are planning for this. We shall be guided by the Bishop and the regulations that will be issued to help us. We are treading carefully with this one. We do not want to be responsible for increasing infections. The spike in infections is still ahead of us, probably in July and August, and we face the danger of being infected and infecting others.

I must admit that I go into this with a fair amount of uncertainty and anxiety. We are living in dangerous times. But as I said last week, let's remember that the church has never closed – only the building. Our life of worship, prayer, love for one another, outreach and support for those in need has continued through this time of lockdown.

A NEW SOCIETY

There is also widespread longing for a new and more compassionate society to emerge from this time of lockdown. Today, on the National Day of Prayer, we pray for the healing of our land and the protection of our people. Lockdown and the pandemic by itself won't bring about change. It is a great concern that the access to alcohol under Level 3 almost certainly will lead to a rise in violence and violent crime, including gender-based violence. We need changed hearts and lives, a change which comes through repentance and faith.

The lockdown has brought to the surface and into the public eye, the huge inequalities in our community and the very real poverty under which many live. There has been an outpouring of support and help towards food aid. Wonderful work has been done by Food4Futures and Mary Birt, the Cathedral Covid care fund, the Circle of Unity, and others. Literally thousands of food parcels and food vouchers have been handed out over the past eight weeks. But are we able to put something more permanent in place? We are aware of great need, huge anger, frustration, despair. As we continue through this pandemic, and as we emerge on the other side, can we change our society for the better? This is both a question and a challenge. It would be a tragedy if everything simply went back to how it was before. And yet the danger is that we do exactly that.

So my prayer is that the Holy Spirit will empower and guide us as we look to the future: a church made new and a society transformed.

CONCLUSION

On this Day of Pentecost, we give thanks for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church. Some of us may be feeling daunted and overwhelmed by what lies ahead tomorrow. Lockdown has brought its own strains and stresses. We ask for a fresh outpouring of God's love and grace into our lives, in particular for power, courage and wisdom.

As the streets become busier and things get going again, we pray for energy and strength for what needs to be done as society opens up again. We pray for **power**, the power of the Spirit, not to control or dominate or manipulate, but power to heal, to restore, to bring change, to create a more just and more equitable society. We pray for **courage** in the face of fear and uncertainty. Courage and strength for our teachers, the children returning to school; students and academics; all those heading back to work; courage for those living and working in hotspots. And we pray for **wisdom** and discernment in the days ahead, wisdom to do what is right, wisdom to guide us, wisdom for those in authority, wisdom for you and me.

Come, Holy Spirit of God. Come to quench and fill our thirst and longing, for life and hope and joy and peace.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ ”

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Dean of Grahamstown
May 2020