

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for May 24, 2026

Acts 2:1-21 - "Empowered by the Holy Spirit"

Grant us your peace, we pray, as justice and love pour down upon the yearning earth. Amen.

I want everyone to sit tall in your seats, as you are able. Feet flat on the ground. Hands on your lap. Close your eyes, think about the readings you've heard today, and open your mind to any imagery that might show up.

Now, take a deep breath in....and let it out.

And again, deep breath in....and let it out.

Let's do that one more time,

deep breath in....and out.

Excellent! How do you feel after that? What kind of images came to you?

Those deep breaths in and out? That's what the church year is like. We spend six months of the year, hurrying about in high holiday mode as we muscle our way through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Eastertide, taking deep breaths and holding them in as we come into each holy season, praying that we get everything right. And then the other half of the year we get to sit in Ordinary time. And I don't mean "humdrum" time. I mean a time to exhale, a time to reflect on all that happened in the other six months, a time to grow into the lessons we heard and learned.

Next week we will celebrate Trinity Sunday as the final day before we exhale and head into Ordinary time. But first, there is today, Pentecost, the fiftieth and the last day of Eastertide. You will hear some people call this the birthday of the church. But a friend of mine has a different take on it that I really like. Celebrating Pentecost as a birthday lead us to self-congratulatory reflections of "yay us!" causing us to turn inward. Pentecost is more than that. Pentecost is the "empowerment of the church. Recognizing this helps us reflect on what we are empowered for. We turn outward; we celebrate not our existence but our calling." Which I think is an excellent way of looking at what's going on around us, especially as we consider the baptisms we will be celebrating shortly.

Luke tells us that the community of disciples is gathered because of the Festival of Weeks. Jesus had promised the arrival of the Holy Spirit not long after his departure and sure enough, on the festival day itself, the Holy Spirit arrives. The scene is spectacular and chaotic: a violent, rushing sound like wind, evoking imagery of the creation in Genesis 1; and then "divided tongues, as of fire" – not a fire that destroys, but rather like the fire that Moses encountered at the burning bush, which was "blazing, yet it was not consumed" in Exodus 3.

You see in these verses wind (or spirit) and fire, and as each person was touched by these, we are reminded of the waters of baptism. Air, fire, water. Three of the four ancient elements. But where is earth? Well, we are earth! Human beings, the "adam", the dust from which we are all created. We, as earth, are incomplete without the other three elements. God as Holy Spirit comes as fire, air, and water so that the dust can be moistened, the air breathed in, and the divine spark put into us so that we can become who we fully are – the messengers of God.

The Spirit's immediate effect is linguistic: many are empowered "to speak in other languages," and at the same time, each person hears each testimony in their native tongue. Think of a meeting at the United Nations, in which everyone hears the proceedings (through a headset) translated into their language.

The upshot of all of this is a sense of togetherness and unity: diverse as they are, everyone understands and can communicate. Accordingly, they're dazzled, bewildered, and taken aback: "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12).

As if to answer this question, Peter stands and speaks. He cites the prophet Joel, adapting those ancient words to illuminate the present: the final and decisive chapter of history has arrived, the dawn of God's joyous Jubilee that Jesus declared early in his ministry, and now comes the long-promised "pouring out" of the Holy Spirit upon "all flesh". Jesus both heralded and inaugurated this new era, and the Spirit will empower a community through whom the movement's message of healing, liberation, and joy will go out to the ends of the earth.

In other words, the church is born and the people within it are empowered! The church is more than the building, more than a gathering in a specific location. The church is God's empowered people. All of them. And the first act of God's Spirit at Pentecost honors the diversity and individuality of the believers. God wants the Good News to be heard by all people and in all languages, especially in God's mother tongue, which is love!

This radical new community about which Joel speaks and which Peter says is realized in the earliest Christian community is remarkably inclusive. It is gender inclusive: "your sons" and "your daughters" (2:17); "servants – both male and female" (2:18). It is age inclusive: "your young people" and "your old people" (2:17). And if we are to take seriously the opening ("all people") of this citation, then this community is also destined to be ethnically inclusive. Diversity is a blessed feature of the Christian life.

And we have all been joined by our Baptism into communities of faith that look for – and expect! – the Holy Spirit to come along side us and shake things up, preparing and equipping each and all of us to share the disruptive, surprising, and life-giving words of grace of the God who will not rest until all people enjoy abundant life.

Breath means new life; new life means growth and change. The Spirit is breathed onto us to protect, to challenge, to provoke, to push, and to call us into action. The church is on a mission, God's mission, to love and protect our neighbours as much as God loves and protects us. The church's ministry begins with the gift of the spirit, not for the sake simply of the church, but for the whole world. The Spirit mobilizes us and opens up new horizons for ministry. The Spirit makes visible and tangible God's promise to be present, to empower, and to compel testimony. We, as witnesses, testify about God who interjects God's self into diverse cultures, languages, and life situations making God's presence felt, heard, and seen, and compelling us to interpret, as best we can, what we have felt, heard, and seen. *This* is what we will spend "ordinary" time doing.

Amen.