

Reading through the events of that day in Jerusalem one-word springs to mind – chaos. Suddenly there’s a sound like the rush of violent wind; and tongues of fire appear out of nowhere; people start to speak in different languages yet all could be understood. I suspect Luke struggled to put into words the disciples’ experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit for that very first time. How do you describe an encounter with – and infilling by – God himself?

So incredible was the moment that Luke uses the language of analogy: ‘a sound *like the blowing of a violent wind*’, and ‘*what seemed to be tongues of fire*’ appear. ‘Wind’ and ‘fire’ were accepted by the Jews as symbols for the powerful and cleansing work of God’s Spirit, and so it makes sense that he should write in such a way that can be likened to these elements.

And whilst we can all imagine what the rush of a violent wind might sound like and tongues of flame might look like, what about a cacophony of different languages being spoken at the same time, yet being understood?

The nearest equivalent I’ve experienced was a service Jane and I attended at St George’s Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem in 2019 when everyone was invited to say the Lord’s prayer in their own language – afterwards it was established there were 17 different languages being spoken at the same time and yet everyone understood what was being said: Our Father, who art in heaven.

Put all three outpourings of the Spirit together and you can understand why there was bewilderment, amazement, and even ridicule ...they have had too much wine.

But for me, that was simply chaos.

You’ve probably heard of the chaos theory, first developed in the 1960’s as part of weather forecasting. One of its best-known illustrations is that when a butterfly in Brazil flaps its wings, a number of indeterminate sequences follows and culminates in a tornado somewhere in the world.

Similarly, as a youngster, I learned this poem reputedly written by Benjamin Franklin shortly after the American Revolution:

“For want of a nail, a shoe was lost;

For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;

For want of a horse, the rider was lost;

For want of a rider, the message was lost;

For want of a message, the battle was lost;

For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost....

all for the want of a lost nail in a horseshoe, chaos ensued.

Maybe that’s why some say our country currently seems to be in chaos. But I think the chaos of Pentecost is different – it is controlled chaos. Now that may sound contradictory - how can chaos be controlled? If chaos is controlled, then it can no longer be chaotic.

But when we bring wind under control, it produces electricity – think wind farm. But wind OUT of control, is a tornado wreaking havoc and destruction to everything in its path. Similarly, fire under control provides heat to warm us – think flaming log fire. But fire OUT of control is raging wildfire destroying everything in its path.

So, on that first day of Pentecost, violent winds might be blowing and tongues of fire might be burning....but they are controlled. They are under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Think back to those few weeks before and after Easter. Everything had seemed to be coming together in the words and deeds of Jesus. His teachings were powerful; he healed the sick; made the lame walk; the blind see; he even restored life to his friend Lazarus.

Then his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion sees the disciples flee in fear and terror, and amidst the chaos they huddle together in a locked room fearing for their lives.....that is until, as we read in the gospel narrative, they are filled with the peace of Christ.

And then on the day of Pentecost, the disciples, filled with the Spirit, start to feel the life force of Jesus flow through them. They are bold, they are excited; they speak in other languages, they are not drunk but on fireyou could say they were on fire for God.

It really is a privilege to be asked to preach but it also quite humbling to think that Peter preached on the first Pentecost and three thousand people became followers of Christ and here am I nearly two thousand birthdays later struggling to find the right words to say.

And from what you have told me over the years, I'm not alone. You do, too.

But the one thing of which I am certain is that the message Peter proclaimed to those gathered in Jerusalem that day is the same that I am trying to deliver today....the good news of Jesus Christ.....the good news of how we can become more like Christ when filled with the Holy Spirit.

We may feel that words are not enough and often they aren't. Don't we say that actions speak louder than words? But that should not prevent us from asking God to send his Holy Spirit, with his powerful and cleansing wind and fire, to work in us and speak through us.

And we can also pray that our friends, neighbours, colleagues, and family will discover God for themselves and have similar indescribable experiences of the Holy Spirit working in their lives.

Maybe we've always been a little afraid of the chaos of Pentecost but let's remember that the Holy Spirit is also the comforter and the one who leads us into truth.

So, let's take the opportunity to celebrate this special day by re-centering ourselves. Let's forget about trying too hard in our own strength. Let's not drift but keep Christ central. Let's set aside those feelings of uncertainty and indecision and stop worrying about what comes next.

As we gather here in Jesus's name, my invitation to you is to join me in making today the day to re-centre ourselves and be filled afresh with the love of God and the presence of the Spirit. To be refreshed and renewed and restored. Amen

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 24 May 2026