

Night Prayer

June 2022

Ascension and Pentecost



A cloud took him?

Introduction

We have already had Ascension Day, which was the 26 May, but because it will always occur mid-week on a Thursday (forty days after Easter) it is a festival that often gets forgotten. Perhaps it is not helped by the way artists over many centuries have given us a picture of Jesus levitating upwards powered by some invisible source. Our convention says that heaven is up there so that has to be the direction of travel.

But suppose we did not have that convention, and heaven was not seen as being in the sky. Let's look at this picture.



This is called *Ngambuny Ascends*, by Sheila Purdie (b 1948) who is one of the senior artists in the Warmun Community situated in the remote north-west corner of Australia. Her work relates traditional Aboriginal culture and 'two way stories' where she draws on her culture to understand the Christian story.

In this painting she places the Ascension of Jesus (Ngambuny) within the local landscape of the Bungle Bungle Ranges of western Australia watched by the loving figure of Mary. The space for ascension is shown black, as in Aboriginal culture black is the colour of skin, of connection and touch. It does not carry European associations where black is the space of fear, darkness or sin.

Black also reminds us of crevices in the rock or caves, like a void open to receive. Such voids are spaces for strong dreaming, as water holes that sustain life or, in this case, as the place where the land receives the Spirit of Christ returning. If there is place for bright shining holiness, it is in this void.

So the point is that Ngambuny, the Christ figure, does not ascend into the sky but back into the land where God as Creator Spirit resides. Christ does not go to a God in heaven, removed from human and social life, but instead is alive in the land. Some Aboriginal people point out the oddity of heaven being in the sky. There is nothing in their culture about heaven and hell. They believe that when they die their spirit goes back to their Homeland, which is their promised land, their heaven.

A useful reminder that God is in the things we see and touch, here, in our daily lives.

Opening Prayer

Why are we looking up to heaven?

Christ has come;

Christ has risen;

Christ will come again.

Confession

Almighty God,
we confess that we have our eyes set in the clouds

instead of on the earth You have given us.

We desire heavenly treasure
but we keep believing that worldly means will help us attain it.

Forgive us for our short sightedness.
Draw us away from the temptations
to seek worldly power and measures of success,
and call us to the down-to-earth message of Your love,
to care for the needs of those around us,
especially the oppressed and marginalized.

You have called us through scripture
to care for the widows and orphans among us;
help us to see all those who are left out by society and are in need.
Help us to break down the dividing walls that we have placed,
so that we may truly be one,
as You and Christ are one.
For it is in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Words of assurance

Go, know that you are forgiven and loved
by the God who made the earth, and made you,
and share the Good News. Amen.

(written by Rev. Mindi and posted on Rev-o-lution.)

Opening Music

'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun', sung here by the Megavissey Male Voice
Choir. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYTjuwgc6PI>

Pentecost

Before it was the name of a Christian holiday, Pentecost (Heb. Shavuot) was celebrated annually by the Jewish people in honour of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Jews still celebrate it today, fifty days after Passover—hence the name *Pentecost* (“pente” = five). (Appropriately, Christian Pentecost occurs fifty days after Easter.) Because of the importance of the feast, ancient Jews travelled from all over the known world to their religious capital, Jerusalem, for the occasion, and that’s what we see in Acts 2—a multiregional, multilinguistic gathering.

New Testament Reading

Acts 2: 1-21

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

'Pentecostal Hour' by Mark DeBolt

No zephyr soft
but cyclone strong
bore thoughts aloft
in windy song.

No flicker mild
but flames of red
danced hot and wild
upon each head.

And so fierce was
our thundering word
in languages
of all who heard,

all knew it meant
the Spirit's power.
This was our Pent-
ecostal hour.

The friends of Jesus are gathered together when suddenly it happens. The Spirit of God comes on the scene in a torrent of power. Acts 2:2 describes his entrance as 'violent'. Other versions have, 'roaring', 'impetuous',—'a mighty rushing wind), or 'a mighty windstorm'. He fills the disciples, causing them to preach in languages that are not their own. Hearing their native tongues, various people from the crowd draw closer to the source, marvelling at how these Galileans could speak so articulately in languages beyond Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. This is only the first of the many mighty works the Spirit-empowered apostles would accomplish on God's behalf in the early church age.

The poem emphasizes the wildness of the Spirit that manifested at the church's first Pentecost—the enormous sound and sweep of his arrival. Three thousand-plus people, Luke tells us, came under his influence that day! He came not as a soft little breeze or puff of air, but as a cyclone; not as a quaint little flickering glow, but as a full-out blaze, more like a bonfire than a burning candlewick. The disciples' words were 'fierce' and 'thundering' in equal

measure, expositing the Hebrew scriptures and proclaiming Jesus to be the risen, reigning Christ.



Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

'Wind' (2019) by Ukrainian artist Denis Sarazin.

Worship song

Shine, Jesus, Shine', sung here at the Royal Albert Hall.
Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4hXJ9ax2FY>

Collect for Pentecost

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father,
ignite in us your holy fire;
strengthen your children with the gift of faith,
revive your Church with the breath of love,
and renew the face of the earth,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in a loving God
whose Word sustains our lives
and the work of our hands in the universe.

God is life.

We believe in God's son among us
who brought the seed of life's renewal.

He lived with the poor to show the meaning of love.

Jesus Christ is Lord.

We believe in the Spirit of Life
who makes us one with God,
whose strength and energy renews our own.

The Spirit is Love.

Camillo Torres, Colombia, from 'Creed'.

Intercessions

God of Pentecost,
We read so many stories and see so many pictures
of people weeping over the bodies of loved ones,
killed deliberately or regarded as collateral damage
in someone else's power struggle;
of people dying from disease with no hospital to take them in
and no medicine to treat them.

What words can we say, who are so far away from these events,
that will bring comfort?

Lord, may your spirit intercede with sighs too deep for words.

God of Pentecost

We read so many stories and see so many pictures of people who are victims of prejudice and discrimination, either as part of some national policy, or through fear and ignorance of what is different.

What words can we say do those who suffer but dare not share what they are going through?

Lord, may your spirit intercede with sighs too deep for words.

God of Pentecost

We read so many stories and see so many pictures of people and animals whose existence is threatened by climate change, who are vulnerable to the pressures of the demands of a consumer-led society and are powerless to change their situation.

What words can we say to those whose future appears bleak, and will be shaped by the actions of others?

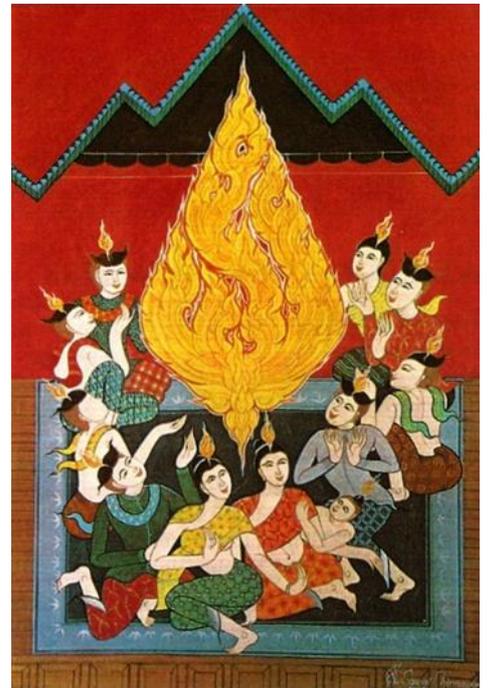
Lord, may your spirit intercede with sighs too deep for words.

God of Pentecost

when we have no words to speak,
may our hearts still burn with your fire,
may we still feel the wind of your Spirit—
a mighty wind, blowing where it will.
Amen.

Closing prayer

Holy One,
For all of the ways you speak to us —
in rushing wind,
in dancing flames,



Sawai Chinnawong, Thai artist,
Pentecost, 1997.

in words we understand,
and in all that transcends language,
we give thanks.

Give us courage to speak your love,
everywhere we go,
to everyone we meet.
Amen.

(written by Joanna Harader, and posted on Practicing Families.)

Blessing

May the advocate, God's Holy Spirit,
sent in Christ's name,
teach you and remind you of Christ's words.

Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Do not be afraid.
Christ's peace go with you
Christ peace, that the world cannot take away, be with you
Christ's peace, and the Spirit's presence,
remain with you always.

(written by Howard Carter, and posted on How in the World.)

Closing Hymn

'Veni Sancti Spiritus': Come Holy Spirit

This is a Taizé chant sung by a virtual choir of 54 young people from 36 different countries.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=us-v4slsUX4>

