



Thought for the Week 30th May 2021

What a difference a day makes!"

"What a Difference a Day Makes" is a song first popularized by Dinah Washington back in the 1950s with later versions sung by many others including Barry Manilow and even Rod Stewart. The phrase has moved into common use, for we all know the truth within it. What a single day can bring can often be life-changing maybe for good or maybe for bad.

We could think of many days in history that made a difference in the world, maybe even days that changed the course of history. **Without doubt, the Day of Pentecost was just such a day.** Our reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles began with the words: "When the Day of Pentecost came."

The timing was very important. It could be translated when "the time was completed that the day of Pentecost came." Before this day, which is often referred to as "The Birthday of the Church" could happen, many things had to be in place. All through history God was working his purposes out towards this day. Did you ever wonder why it took God so long to send the Messiah? Why all that Old Testament history for thousands of years before he brought his plan of salvation into being in Jesus? Only God knows the full answer to that question, but we have some clues in the history of Israel and the world around her.

When Israel failed to be the nation God had called her to be – "a light to lighten the gentiles" - their land was invaded, their great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and they were carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. The Babylonian empire was replaced by the Persian empire and the Jews were allowed to return to their land. The Temple worship was restored but it no longer played a central role, as previously. The people now worshipped together in small local groups in synagogues, which were spread not only through Israel but across the known world under the Greeks, then the Egyptians and finally the mighty Roman empire.

The Roman empire unified the known world in way never know before, or indeed since with a common language. They built magnificent roads that enabled communication in an unprecedented way. The Pax Romana, though it was enforced with a heavy hand, brought peace and safety to the Middle East. All these things – the network of local synagogues, the common language, the roads, the relative safety and peace of the Roman Empire - enabled the Good News of the Gospel to be spread through the world in a way that would not have been possible at any other time. Of course, these factors didn't just come about by chance- they were not coincidences, but God-incidences! "When the time was right," Paul says, "God sent his son, born of a woman."

But this spreading of the Good News of salvation for all mankind in Jesus Christ could not have happened without one more significant factor – the Day of Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit in power upon Jesus' disciples and his followers brought everything together to make it a day that changed the course of history. And there is also significance that Pentecost (celebrated

50 days after the Passover) was the Jewish feast day that marked the beginning of the harvesting period. And on that day thousands of pilgrims from all over the world were in Jerusalem!

Jesus had promised that, after he had ascended back to heaven, the Holy Spirit would come in power to guide them into all truth (John 16:13) fulfilling a prophesy given by Joel that God would, *“pour out his Spirit on all people.”* But after Jesus was crucified, his disciples and followers went into a house and slammed the door shut out of fear that they might be next to be hung on a cross. Yes, they were encouraged when they met with the risen Jesus, but they were still very unsure about how they could fulfil his instruction to *“As you are going, make disciples from all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* (Matt 28:19).

Then, without him with them again, gathered together in a secret location, they had no peace, no contentment and no power. They couldn't have known of the immeasurable task that lay before them, the stubborn unbelief they would encounter, the entrenched and vested interests of government, commerce and religion that would oppose them, never mind the cruel persecutions that awaited them.

But what a difference a day makes! So, let's take a little look at what happened on that day that made such a difference. Afterwards they probably found it difficult to describe exactly what happened to them – but they knew for certain something had. Some said it felt like a mighty wind was blowing, but they weren't blown away – other said they saw what looked like tongues of fire, but they weren't physically burned. They suddenly and miraculously had the ability to speak in languages other than their own Aramaic – remember these were mostly uneducated folk.

What they did know was that something had changed. Their fear was gone, they had a new peace and a new power. The doors were opened and they poured out onto the crowded streets of Jerusalem, bursting with enthusiasm to tell everyone they met what had just happened to them and how God had broken into their lives in a special way. Naturally, a crowd of people gathered as pilgrims from all over the empire heard them speak in their own local native language – some of them are listed in verses 9-11. Then Peter stood up and addressed the crowd.

The text doesn't tell us, but possibly Peter spoke in the Hebrew language that all Jews had to learn or maybe in Greek, which was the common language of commerce and trade in the Roman Empire. Perhaps the miracle that God gave that day continued and everyone heard Peter as if he was speaking in their own language. Now, this was the same Peter who, on the night Jesus was arrested, was intimidated by a little servant girl who accused him of being a follower of Jesus, denied, with an oath that he even knew him. Now, without fear, Peter preached a powerful sermon.

They certainly got his message about Jesus loud and clear – that he was the Messiah who they longed for. Using Old Testament references he explained how Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they thought would come, but one who had been crucified and raised to life again and now, ascended to heaven, was made Lord and Messiah (Christ) the saviour of the world. And God had now sent his Holy Spirit to all people so that they might know the truth of the Gospel. Remember, a lot of the people gathered to hear Peter were probably the same ones who had shouted to Pilate to crucify Jesus, just a few weeks previously.

Before they had experienced the Holy Spirit coming upon them, Peter would never had dared to be so bold in what he said. But, in the power of the holy Spirit the message certainly was heard and, as verse 37 tells us, the people were “cut to the heart.” “What shall we do?” was the question they asked Peter. His answer was as clear as crystal.

“Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

That is the same message that we preach today in the power of the Holy Spirit. It can be heard, I hope loud and clear, in your own language. It is a “for all” message – it’s for you and for me and for everyone who’s sin has separated them from God. Notice in verse 39 it says *“for you and for your children”* – repeating the Old Testament Covenant promise given to Abraham – which is why we baptise the children of believers when they publicly declare their faith in Christ and promise to bring their children up with the Christian faith.

It’s the message the Jesus told his disciples to take to the world – in Acts 1, just before his ascension, he said:

“... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Before the Day of Pentecost, they never really had it all together, but when God gave them the power of the Holy Spirit they went out as bold witnesses for Jesus Christ. Maybe we’ve become like the pre-Pentecost followers of Jesus, and the year or more that we’ve just had has certainly knocked back our confidence as well as our opportunities to be witnesses for the gospel in our Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, never mind the ends of the earth.

We need a fresh in-filling of God’s Holy Spirit – or indeed a new infilling if you’ve never yielded your life to Christ - which the Bible assures us is ours for the asking. Maybe then today could be a **day that really does make a difference.** Amen.

PCI Let’s Pray

Sunday 30 May

Moderator

As the Moderator makes plans to visit congregations in person, pray that these meetings would be a blessing and demonstrate how the Presbyterian family in Ireland belongs together.

Worship as testimony

‘I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.’ Psalm 9:1.

Today as we worship in person, online or on our own, pray that our hearts may be granted the words to thank God and to remember all the wonderful ways he shows us his love.

Monday 31 May

Naomi Lere more (global mission worker in Kenya)

Pray for wisdom and guidance for Naomi and the others on the team writing lessons for the Vacation Bible School on the theme of peace and conflict resolution. Pray too for the Covid-19 situation in Kenya, for those affected by the disease and those struggling with the economic consequences.

Syria & Lebanon

Pray for the work and witness of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, especially for their efforts to bring humanitarian aid and education to refugees and displaced people in the region.

Tuesday 1 June

Tom Dowling (Irish mission worker in Kilkenny)

Give thanks for all who participated in the online Bible Studies. Give thanks for the Market Evangelism which has resumed and for good interest from passers-by.

Christchurch, Sandymount, Dublin

Give thanks for the wider community in the area and all their support as the congregation creates a new and sustainable plan for the use of Christ Church Hall. Pray for the Church Council as they re-form congregational life and energy for a new time.

Wednesday 2 June

Middle East

Give thanks for the ceasefire between Israel and Palestine. Pray for those who have been injured, those who are grieving, those who are living in fear due to the recent attacks and unrest. Pray for those trying to bring immediate and long-term peace, justice and a fair society for all in the Holy Land.

Bethlehem Bible College & Nazareth Evangelical College

Pray for staff and students at these colleges, especially for the students sitting exams and those seeking to complete their studies amidst disruption and insecurity.

Thursday 3 June

Roberta Irvine (deaconess in Greystone Road, Antrim)

Pray for the congregation during this time of vacancy and as the members look forward into the 2020s. Join them in prayer as decisions are made in preparation for a new minister and in regard to viable ministries that emerge in this season. Pray too for Roberta as she serves.

Smithborough (Co Monaghan)

Praise God for those recovering from Covid-19 and pray for their return to full health. Pray for the upcoming Children's Day service online, that all involved will know God's blessing.

Friday 4 June

Social Witness

Pray for the Specialist Services Units – Thompson House, Carlisle House and Gray's Court. Pray for those who have been discharged from prison, that they may work hard to remain in the community. Pray for those who are recovering from addictive behaviours, that they may find a new focus in their lives.

Local Government

Give thanks for those who step up to serve their communities across Ireland on local councils. In Northern Ireland pray for those who will take on the leadership role of Mayor or Council Chair for the coming year. Pray that they would be good leaders and make a positive impact.

Saturday 5 June

General Council

As congregations resume in-person meetings both in Northern Ireland and ROI, please pray for Kirk Sessions who will be making difficult decisions regarding the planned re-opening of activities as restrictions in both jurisdictions allow. Pray also for the Clerk of Assembly as he and leaders of other denominations interact on these issues with both governments.

Council for Training in Ministry

This Thursday, the final interview for selecting student deaconesses takes place. It is hoped that three students will begin training at Union College in September. Pray for the interview panel, the prospective students, and for the staff at Union as they put the finishing touches to the training programme.