

Moved by the Spirit: Communion within Difference

Tatjana Ljujić

Cathedral Eucharist on Pentecost, 24 May 2026

Acts 2.1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

The passage from Acts that we heard in our first reading this morning took me back to the time when I was first exploring a vocation to ordained ministry in the Church of England. As part of the discernment process, I was sent to experience worship in traditions very different from my own familiar world of contemplative prayer and choral liturgy. To broaden my horizons, I was sent to worship with charismatics.

Hands up if you have ever experienced worship in a charismatic church.

For those unfamiliar with that tradition, charismatics often describe their worship as 'Spirit-led'. There is little discernible liturgy, at least as your average cathedral congregant would understand the term. For much of the service, worshippers are on their feet: singing, dancing, arms raised in the air.

The sensory dynamism of charismatic worship seeks to echo the movement of the Spirit at Pentecost, as narrated in Acts. The passage we heard this morning paints a vivid sensory picture of the disciples being filled with the Holy Spirit: visually ('divided tongues, as of fire'), and aurally ('a sound like the rush of a violent wind'). Yet the imagery of Pentecost is not only vivid; it is deeply symbolic. It draws upon several iconic images from the Hebrew Bible associated with the Spirit of God.

First: fire. Memorably, Moses encounters God in the burning bush. The bush is aflame, yet not consumed. Likewise, the apostles are touched by fire, yet not burned up. The author of Acts clearly intends readers familiar

with the symbolism of the Hebrew Scripture to recognise that God is present here.

Then there is wind. In the opening verses of Genesis, we read of 'a wind from God' sweeping over the face of the waters as creation comes into being. The Hebrew word used there, *ruach*, carries a triple meaning: wind, breath, and spirit. So when Acts tells us that 'from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind', and when, in our Gospel reading, Jesus breathes upon the disciples and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, we encounter all three: wind, breath, and spirit. Taken together, these passages suggest that what we are witnessing is nothing less than a new creation.

The third symbol is the tongue. Acts speaks of 'divided tongues, as of fire' resting upon the apostles. One need not make a great interpretative leap to see that the tongue symbolises speech: the Spirit gives people the ability to proclaim what they have encountered. More importantly, the Spirit enables them to communicate in ways others can understand.

Pentecost is not simply about ecstatic experience. It is about communication across barriers of language and culture. To me, Pentecost is fundamentally about intelligibility and inclusivity. Yet in the charismatic church I visited, despite the outward resemblance between their worship and the Pentecost story, those two qualities seemed largely absent to me.

Perhaps that was simply my own discomfort speaking. Being among charismatic Christians was a very strange experience for me. I remember returning to my vocations adviser and saying: 'For the first time in my life, I felt more English than the English.'

I was surrounded by English people — English churchgoers! — and yet *I* was the one who looked stiff and inhibited. I did not know what to do with

my body. In the absence of a hymn book or service sheet to hold, my arms dangled awkwardly at my sides. I attempted a few dance moves and immediately regretted them. Good Lord, I thought, people around me are channelling the Holy Spirit, and I am channelling Theresa May.

Then, during prayer ministry, people formed small groups and prayed semi-loudly for one another. Most prayed in English, but I overheard someone praying in speech-like yet unintelligible sounds — they were ‘speaking in tongues’.

Now, I had promised myself that I would approach unfamiliar traditions with openness, and so I made a conscious effort to understand what I was witnessing. Perhaps, I thought, unintelligible speech can itself communicate something meaningful: an acknowledgement that spiritual experience ultimately exceeds language, while still compelling expression, so that what emerges is speech that is not quite speech.

Yet what unsettled me far more than the question of unintelligible speech was the lack of an inclusive vision: the narrow assumption about what being moved by the Spirit ought to look like. If you have not been moved in this particular, scripturally sanctioned way — one that quite literally re-enacts the episode from Acts — then the authenticity of your experience becomes suspect.

(There were many other aspects of what ‘scripturally sanctioned’ entailed in that context with which I also struggled, but those are perhaps for another sermon.)

When, after the service, I confessed that I had not felt especially ‘moved’, I was told that I simply needed to pray, and the Spirit would come. But when I replied that I do feel moved in prayer — though through silent meditation, perhaps, rather than ecstatic dance — I was asked: ‘How do

you know that it is the Spirit moving you?' That question has stayed with me. How do we discern the Spirit of God? How do we know that the flame alive within us is truly holy fire, rather than some ego-driven fantasy?

In this morning's second reading, from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we hear that there are 'varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit'. Not everybody receives the same gifts, manifests the same emotions, or worships in the same way. God speaks in manifold ways: loudly and silently, through movement and through stillness, through clarity and through mystery.

Yes, in Acts, the movement of the Spirit appears spectacularly dynamic. But in Saint John's Gospel, which we heard this morning, the risen Christ simply breathes upon the disciples and says, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' Notice how the gift is given here: not through spectacle, noise, or ecstasy, but quietly and intimately.

Moreover, what happens in the Pentecost story is not that everybody suddenly speaks the same language, but that each person hears the good news in their own tongue. The miracle of Pentecost is not that the Spirit erases difference, but that the Spirit enables communion within difference. The Spirit does not demand uniformity. The Spirit creates understanding across barriers.

And so the true sign of the Spirit may not be whether worship looks dramatic, ecstatic, ritualised, or contemplative. The true sign may be whether it becomes more generous, more intelligible, and more open to those standing outside our particular religious language and customs.

For whenever the Church speaks only in ways insiders can understand, whenever we imply that God moves through only one culture, one style of worship, one emotional register, or one spiritual vocabulary, we reverse

Pentecost. We turn the miracle of radical intelligibility back into the incomprehension of Babel.

Pentecost calls the Church in the opposite direction: towards speech that can be heard, grace that can be recognised, and communities spacious enough to reflect the abundance and diversity of the spiritual gifts bestowed upon the whole people of God.