**Missional Partnership Service of Worship – Sunday 16th May 2021**

**led by Rev Daniel Harris**

**Introduction:**

Welcome to this morning’s service.

This week’s service is exciting for several reasons.

Firstly, next week many churches open for the first time in months. We are coming out of lockdown.

Secondly, next week is Pentecost marking the birth of the church and the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

And thirdly, we are invited to see the world in new ways. We use what we know of the world around us to imagine and visualise a new way of seeing the world.

God asks us to become active players in making heaven on earth.

This is why we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “You kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

However, we cannot do this by ourselves.

Ands nor should we even attempt to do it by ourselves.

This is why we ask God’s Spirit to come into our lives - to empower and direct us.

**Hymn: Light of the World**

Light of the world

You stepped down into darkness

Opened my eyes, Let me see

Beauty that made this heart adore you

Hope of a life spent with you

Here I am to worship

Here I am to bow down

Here I am to say that you're my God

You're altogether lovely

Altogether worthy

Altogether wonderful to me

King of all days

So highly exalted

Glorious in heaven above

Humbly you came to the earth you created

All for love's sake became poor

Here I am to worship

Here I am to bow down

Here I am to say that you're my God

You're altogether lovely

Altogether worthy

Altogether wonderful to me

I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross

Here I am to worship

Here I am to bow down

Here I am to say that you're my God

You're altogether lovely

Altogether worthy

Altogether wonderful to me

**Prayers of Approach:**

Spirit of the Living God, dance with us on this day.

**Come, Whirlwind of Wonder!**

Sing to the groaning of creation.

**Come, still small voice of Hope!**

Enflame us with your passion for justice.

**Come, Liberator of the Least!**

Purify us of our grasping greediness.

**Come, Advocate of selfless living!**

Silence our gossiping tongues.

**Come, Harmony of God's Heart!**

Wind of God, blow through us;

Fire of God, burn within us;

Tongue of God, speak to us on this day of renewal and birth,

even as we pray as Jesus teaches us,

Our Father who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us,

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory,

forever and ever.

Amen.

**Ask The Family:**

Welcome to another occasional episode of the classic family quiz *Ask The Family.* Today features a multiple choice round which should leave you scratching your heads. So, without further ado, let’s commence with the first round ….

Round 1: Which famous 1970s pop band launched the career of the famous American soul singer Phillip Bailey?

1. The Electric Light Orchestra
2. Hot Chocolate
3. Earth Wind and Fire

Round 2: There are four famous classical elements. Three of them are earth, air and fire. What is the missing classical element.

1. Cheese
2. Water;
3. Richard Bradley’s socks.

Round 3: The modern Periodic Table lists 118 chemical elements. What were the first two elements created at the moment of the Big Bang?

1. Copper and iron;
2. Gold and platinum;
3. Hydrogen and helium.

Round 4: Which of the classical elements symbolises Pentecost?

1. Fire
2. Earth;
3. Air;
4. Water.

Answers: (1) Earth, Wind and Fire; (2) Water; (3) hydrogen and helium; (4) Fire.

Talking about things such as God, heaven and the Holy Spirit can sometimes be tricky because we cannot see them. Modern day scientists believe that there are many universes, but also have trouble visualising them because (if these universes do exist) they cannot yet be detected.

This is why the Bible uses down-to-earth objects and stories to visualise what cannot be seen. In Jesus’ day many people believed that the four classical elements of earth, air, water and fire were the fundamental building blocks of the universe. The Bible makes use of these to visualise God.

Today we are going to see how Jesus used three of these elements - earth, air and water - to visualise God’s power and presence in everyday life. What about the fourth element fire? Well, we will find out about that shortly …

**Scripture Reading: John 3.1-12**

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2**He came to Jesus[a] by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” **3**Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”[b] **4**Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” **5**Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6**What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.[c] **7**Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You[d] must be born from above.’[e] **8**The wind[f] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” **9**Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10**Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

**11**“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you[g] do not receive our testimony. **12**If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

**Hymn: Breathe on me, Breath of God.**

Let’s come to God, to ask God’s Spirit to come down on us, as we sing ….

Breathe on me, Breath of God,

Fill me with life anew,

That I may love what Thou dost love,

And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,

Until my heart is pure,

Until with Thee I will one will,

To do and to endure.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,

Till I am wholly Thine,

Until this earthly part of me

Glows with Thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,

So shall I never die,

But live with Thee the perfect life

Of Thine eternity.

**Sermon:**

Today, we will be talking a bit about earth, wind and fire … with a bit of water thrown in.

Not the 1970s soul band, but the fundamental elements of the universe as understood by the classical world.

We see this way of seeing the physical world come through in the stories of the Bible.

For us today, who see the physical world in different terms, we will see that the four elements of earth, wind, fire and water become stepping stones that lead us closer to Pentecost.

We see these stepping stones in the conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus.

These stepping stones guide us as we move closer to a living relationship with the God who loves us so very dearly.

So, let’s talk about earth, wind, and fire … with a splash of water.

***Earth:***

Evolutionary Biologist Richard Dawkins says that we are made of the dust of dying stars. We are stardust. He says that there is no God, there is no ultimate meaning in the universe, and that we have to find our own meaning. But at the end of it all, we will return to dust.

The dust of the earth is our first classical element - which humans are formed.

While our scientific understanding of the physical world has changed, that sense of coming from and returning to dust still has deep meaning for us.

Genesis 2.7 says:

***Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=gen+2.7&version=NRSV%22%20%5Cl%20%22fen-NRSV-38a%22%20%5Co%20%22See%20footnote%20a)***] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.***

But there is a spark of hope here. It is God’s breath – God’s Spirit – which gives us life. This reminds us that outside of God’s care, our lives are fragile.

Our bodies come from dust, and we will return to dust.

Whatever we do in life will not change this unescapable fact.

We can pretend that our lives are not fragile.

We can play the power games.

We could say that we are self-sufficient.

Indeed, some people have more power, wealth and influence to assert their self-sufficiency than others.

But at the end of the day we lead fragile lives; we are destined to return to dust.

Jesus and Nicodemus would start their conversation from this shared perspective.

This understanding of humanity’s fragility literally grounds their conversation.

***Water:***

Now, let's get out into deeper waters, for God does not want to leave us in this fragile state.

We are invited to join in with this renewing of life, which is often described in the language of pregnancy and childbirth.

Water is inevitably connected with new birth.

When the waters break you know that your life is going to change.

When my wife gave birth to our sons, and I held them gingerly for the first time in my arms, their precious lives felt so fragile. But they were our kids, and we loved them. We would shelter them and care for them. That task didn’t make me feel strong. In fact, it felt quite daunting at first.

Childbirth is a sacred moment.

It reminds us that we are are all fragile.

But it can signpost us to a deeper love.

It can remind us that God bestows dignity upon us, and gives us meaning and purpose in life.

The waters of baptism signify that start of this new life.

Our scripture reading shows us that this can often lead to confusion.

As Nicodemus said to Jesus, “do I have to re-enter my mother’s womb and be born a second time?”

We can see that the conversation between Jesus goes different ways at a very early stage.

The idea of a spiritual rebirth seems to disturb Nicodemus.

His spirituality is evidently grounded on *terra firma.*

In frustration, Jesus tells him: “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

We can see that Jesus is trying to lift Nicodemus’ perspective of Nicodemus from looking at the dust of the ground to look at the sky, but Nicodemus seems unable to look upwards.

Another level of birth needs to occur.

We could call it a spiritual awakening, we could call it spiritual rebirth, or being born from above.

It could be a slow realisation, or it could happen in the immediacy of a crisis.

It is not just a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence; it is a continual transformation

The possibility of this birth of new life should always excite us.

However, Nicodemus’ apparent ignorance offers a cautionary warning to us.

It is possible to take our spiritual renewal for granted, and so stop embracing it.

Nicodemus demonstrates that it is possible to miss the grace of God which is under our very noses.

***Wind:***

Let’s get some wind in our sails.

Let’s explore things further as Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus opens the possibility of exploring new and distant shores.

One of the things about the birth of a child is this.

It tells you that your world has changed - that things are no longer going to be the same.

My oldest son Ethan was ironically born on the 4th July 2009.

One of my friends declared this day as the Loss of Dan’s Independence Day.

I could no longer lead life as an individual doing my own thing.

A new child in your hands announces new responsibilities.

It also announces that the ordered world that we have previously resided in is over.

Likewise, Jesus shows to Nicodemus that spiritual renewal threatens our ordered world.

If we take a life in Christ seriously, we will be presented with the reality that our independence is threatened.

Jesus describes the spiritual life in terms of our third element - the wind:

**The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

If we are to step into that spiritual life, if we are to let God’s Spirit birth something new in us, we must be willing for mystery to enter our lives.

Control, certainty and predictability are the watch-words of much of modern life.

Life in the Spirit goes to a different drum-beat, and it encourages us to trust the God who directs us to new and exciting shores.

This sort of life can lead to uncertainty and fear.

Where will the wind blow us?

Will it dash us on some rocks?

These are very reasonable concerns, for we must be humble in the full force of the wind.

So, let me offer this analogy which might be of comfort.

As you may know, I ride a motorcycle.

For those of you who aren’t aware, motorcycles are particularly susceptible to windy conditions.

One of my friends recently lost control of his motorcycle while riding in particularly windy conditions.

Several years ago I was riding down the M2 motorway towards London.

The M2 crosses the River Medway along a long exposed bridge.

The estuary crossing can be deceptively windy.

The roads leading to the bridge from either end are sheltered from the wind.

You have little warning of the force of the wind until you are on the bridge itself.

As I entered the bridge I was in the process of overtaking a large lorry.

I was initially riding in the slip-stream of the lorry and it protected me from the wind blowing down the Medway estuary.

However, I wasn’t aware of the force of the wind until I started to clear the lorry.

The wind caught me unawares and started to force me towards the central reservation barrier.

What was I going to do?

I slowed down and re-entered the slipstream of the lorry until we had cleared the bridge.

I think that living by the Spirit is like following God’s slip-stream.

The Spirit protects us from forces which would usually conspire to erode that most precious of things - the ember of faith that often feels like it might be blown out.

*In life w*e will feel turbulence, yes, but God's presence is protecting us and empowering us.

It’s all about living within his effort and power, not just our own.

***Fire:***

But there is one element missing …. The element of fire.

Next week is Pentecost which marks the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church.

Jesus told his disciples to wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

The Book of Acts describes that arrival resembling a firestorm.

Likewise, as many of our churches open physically for the first time, way we wait for the fresh arrival of the Holy Spirit on our lives.

We are of the dust of the earth, but may we look to the heavens from where our hope comes.

May we enter the waters of baptism taking us to a renewed spiritual life.

May the winds of the Spirit take us to new and undiscovered countries.

May we travel in God’s slip-stream.

And may the fire of the Holy Spirit empower us as we journey out of lockdown and travel towards Pentecost.

Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession:**

Thank you, Lord our God, that you see and know us completely and that in you we live and move and have our being.

Your word says that in you, Jesus, and through faith in you, we can approach God the Father with freedom and confidence.

Our Father in heaven, nothing in all creation is hidden from your sight, so we approach you boldly in our weakness, with confidence expecting you to help us in our time of need

In a moment of stillness, we pray for our world, our nation, our communites, families and friends:

*(Bring your own prayers to God …)*

O God, our true life, to know you is life, to serve you is freedom, to enjoy you is a kingdom, to praise you is the joy and happiness of the soul.

We praise and bless and adore you, we worship you and glorify you.

We give thanks to you for your great glory.

We ask that you to live with us, reign in us, to make this heart of ours a holy temple, a fit habitation for your divine majesty.

*(Tim Hopley)*

Thank you that you choose to share your glory with us.

May our lives give glory to you.

Reveal your loving, healing hand today, because you care for us and just because you can.

Be glorified in Jesus. Amen

Amen.

**Hymn: Awake My Soul**

Awake, my soul, and with the sun

Thy daily stage of duty run;

Shake off dull sloth, and joyful rise,

To pay thy morning sacrifice.

By influence of the Light divine

Let thy own light to others shine.

Reflect all Heaven’s propitious ways

In ardent love, and cheerful praise.

Wake, and lift up thyself, my heart,

And with the angels bear thy part,

Who all night long unwearied sing

High praise to the eternal King.

Lord, I my vows to Thee renew;

Disperse my sins as morning dew.

Guard my first springs of thought and will,

And with Thyself my spirit fill.

Direct, control, suggest, this day,

All I design, or do, or say,

That all my powers, with all their might,

In Thy sole glory may unite.

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

**Benediction:**

Go out into God’s world filled with the spark of the Holy Spirit.

Let love guide your actions.

Listen for the Spirit of Truth.

Spread the peace of Christ and remind everyone you meet that each one is a beloved child of God. Amen.