

The meaning of Pentecost by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 24th May 2026 at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Reading(s): Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23

Introduction: the Product Launch

Have you ever been part of a product launch event? Or perhaps the opening of an exhibition, such as the Art Festival here in church? What do you think are the key ingredients for getting people to engage with your event or product?

I typed “Product launch ideas” into Microsoft’s Co-Pilot AI and here are some of the ideas that were suggested:

1. Immersive Experience Launch

Create themed zones, Virtual Reality demos, or sensory experiences that let guests *feel* the product’s story rather than just hear about it.

2. Mystery Teaser Campaign

Build anticipation with cryptic social media posts, countdowns, and sneak peeks.

3. Pop-Up Activation

Host a temporary pop-up in a high-footfall area. Make it Instagram-worthy with bold visuals, live demos, and exclusive early access to the product.

4. Collaboration with a Cause

Tie your launch to a meaningful social or environmental cause. For example, pledge a portion of sales to charity or host a community event that aligns with your brand values.

What sort of promotion would you choose to launch a major spiritual movement with a mission to reach every corner of the earth? Let's see how God launched his flagship project – the Church.

The Launch of the Church

Today is Pentecost Sunday, sometimes described as the birthday of the Church. As the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples of Jesus, some 120 of them, both men and women, they were transformed from a fearful group, daunted by the mission Jesus had given them, into a crowd of joyful, faith-filled witnesses to the power of God. By the end of the day 3,000 new believers had been baptised, and a community of Jesus-followers had been established, who listened to the teaching of the apostles, prayed together and shared their lives together. That's a pretty impressive launch!

In chapter 1 of the Book of Acts we read that the 120 disciples who had gathered in Jerusalem had been devoting themselves to prayer in preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They weren't sure when or how it would come. They hadn't prepared any social media campaign, virtual reality demos or promotional discounts.

Then the unexpected happened: the sound of a violent wind outside the house where they were gathered, a vision of tongues of flame alighting on each person in the room, and an

overwhelming sense of the presence, the love and the power of God which led them to speak, shout and sing praises to God in languages which they had never learnt.

And as they spilled out into the street, speaking and worshipping without any inhibition, the passers-by stopped to listen. These were not just the residents of Jerusalem, but Jewish pilgrims from many countries who had travelled to the Holy City for the Jewish Festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost.

God had provided his own sensory experiences for the launch of the Church's mission to spread the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the world.

The Day of Pentecost began a process that resulted in the Christian faith being spread within a few decades throughout the Roman Empire, becoming eventually the dominant religion in Europe and now the largest single religion in the world. Three thousand conversions on that day was a pretty impressive result, although afterwards the growth of the Church was more like a steady trickle.

The significance of Pentecost

So today is the birthday of the Church. Happy Birthday, everyone! But it is more than an event 2,000 years ago. The message for us is that God can take ordinary people and do extraordinary things through them. A couple of chapters later in Acts, Peter and John are arrested and brought in front of the religious authorities. Luke records that:

when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus¹.

If we call ourselves Christians, companions of Jesus, then we too are part of this missionary movement, bringing God's blessing to those around us, in our families, workplaces and communities. We don't need to be experts on the Bible, or to have all the answers to people's complex questions. We just need to be ready for the Holy Spirit to fill us and send us. He will equip us with whatever we need to be witnesses to Jesus wherever we are.

The Welsh Revival, 1904

Evan Roberts was the son of a coal miner in Cardiganshire, Wales at the end of the 19th Century. At 11 years old he started working with his father in the mines. At 26 he had started training for the Methodist ministry, when he heard the preaching of Seth Joshua, and as he turned to God in prayer felt his own "baptism in the Holy Spirit". From this encounter began the Welsh Revival of 1904, in which it is recorded that 100,000 people were converted in the first two years.²

There have been many revivals throughout history, perhaps the best-known of which was the Methodist Revival in the Church of England in the 18th Century, led by John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, all Anglican priests. The next two hymns we will sing in this service were written by Charles

¹ Acts 4:13 NRSV

² <https://revival-library.org/histories/1904-1905-welsh-revival/>

Wesley. These Methodists, as they were nicknamed, certainly knew about the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sadly, the authorities in the Church of England in the 18th Century were not ready for the working of the Holy Spirit through the Methodist movement, and so it became a separate denomination, the Methodist Church. May we not make the same mistake today!

The Holy Spirit today

All of this may sound a long way from our experience here in Aldenham. But don't worry - God doesn't only work in mass revivals – he also brings people into his Kingdom one at a time, often in very unobtrusive ways.

This afternoon I will be attending a Confirmation service in Woodley, Reading. There we will pray for the Holy Spirit to fill the candidates, and the Bishop of Reading will lay hands on them and anoint them with oil. I will be attending to support two candidates from our last church, a man of 62 and a teenager of 14, both of whom have found God for themselves. Brian is a retired BBC engineer. Not having been a churchgoer before, he came to a carol service church and picked up a leaflet about the Christian faith and an invitation card about a small group course on the basics of Christianity. This morning, 5 months later, he will be giving his testimony in our church, saying how God has become real to him and he is now a committed disciple of Jesus.

Zac, 14, belongs to a Christian family who worship at our former church. He did a short course for young people led by

our Family Worker Sarah, and decided he too wanted to commit his life to Jesus Christ.

These are just two very different people that I have had the privilege to see becoming disciples of Jesus recently. I'm sure many of you will have your own stories, many quite undramatic, of how God has become real in your experience. Each of us comes to Christ in our own way. But when we do, it is because the Holy Spirit is working in our hearts.

Pentecost and us

So as we think today about the birth of the Church on the Day of Pentecost two thousand years ago, what might God want us to take away? I think the miraculous phenomena which are described in the Book of Acts – wind, fire, speaking in other tongues – should remind us of the supernatural power of God. The growth of the early church, and the accounts of revivals at various times of history, remind us that God can do extraordinary things through ordinary people – people like you and me. Each of us, if we are willing, could be a channel for God to touch the lives of other people around us. This church can be a spiritual centre where people find God for themselves.

The power behind our mission is the power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not our job to convert people. Our job is to be faithful witnesses to the work that God has done in us. We bear witness by the example of our lives and by our willingness to speak about God to others in whatever way may be appropriate for the people we are trying to reach.

And, as in the story of Pentecost, it all begins with prayer. The disciples of Jesus spent the time between his Ascension and Pentecost praying. If we want to see God's power at work in and through us and our church, we also need to devote ourselves to prayer, both as individuals and as a church. Perhaps a monthly prayer meeting might be a good place to start?

We could even start today. The first three hymns in this service are all about the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of someone who follows Jesus. The first, *Come down, o love divine* was written by a 15th century Italian; the second by an Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century; and the third by the co-founder of Methodism in the 18th century. I mention these to show that being filled with the Holy Spirit is part of the normal Christian life – it's not some optional extra for "super-spiritual Christians"!

So let me finish with a prayer, using words from one of our hymns, and as we sing today and come to the altar to receive Christ's body and blood, let us pray for a fresh filling with the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Lord, we have been reminded today that you can use ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Give us the faith to believe that you can take our lives and do wonderful things through us, to bring blessing to others.

And so we pray to be filled with your Holy Spirit today.

Come down, O love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,

And visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.³

³ Bianco da Siena, d. 1434; trans. Richard Frederick Littledale, Jr., 1867