

Pentecost 2016 sermon – Acts 2:1-21 The normal, supernatural life ('They were all gathered')

READ v1,2,4. What does it look like when the Holy Spirit is actively at work in the world? Let me tell you some stories. (I know you're used to me going through the passage in detail, but most of you will have heard this passage many times – so today I'm going to tell you some stories...)

1999 – Alise and I were attending a course on how to pray for others. As part of the course we were all encouraged to pray for each other for various needs. We met a lady called Bidy who had had a noticeable lump on her wrist for approximately 10 years. We put our hands over the lump and prayed – when we removed our hands, the lump had virtually disappeared. To this day, none of us knows how this happened – it just did.

In 2001, I started helping out at with an Alpha Course at Wandsworth Prison. As some of you will know, one of the alpha sessions discusses the question: 'Does God heal today?' Inmates were invited to seek prayer for healing for any particular ailments. Myself and a friend called Tim were approached by John. John had arthritic hands and poor blood circulation. Both were causing him significant discomfort: he had not been able to open his hands fully for years, and he kept needing bigger shoes, which is not always easy in prison: he was currently a size 10.5. Tim and I prayed first for his hands and then for his feet. While praying, I put my hands lightly on his feet and felt a jolt run through my arms. The prayer finished and we began our group discussions. About 15 minutes into the group, we noticed that John was wiggling his thumb, which he hadn't done for years – he then opened his hands.

The next week we returned to the prison and a very excited John told us that his blood circulation had improved so dramatically that he had dropped 1.5 shoe sizes in a week – he was now a size 9! He later wrote his testimony down and we were delighted to read it at our church a few weeks later.

Later in 2001, our study group leader Sarah confessed she was having real problems with RSI in her arm, which had got to the point where it was affecting her capacity to work. We all gathered round her to pray. The pain left her immediately, and at the time I recorded this event a few years later, still had not returned. She was able to work again normally.

In October 2002, we were singing the opening songs at our evening service at church when I had a sudden sense that someone in the church had a problem with their left eye. This is usually a sign that God wants to do something about it, so after the songs I shared it privately with the service leader. At the end of the service, the leader shared that someone in the congregation might have a problem with their left eye, and that if they'd like someone to pray for them they should come to the front after the service. I noticed a few people coming forward with various prayer needs and went through to the hall for a cup of coffee as normal.

The next week after the service I was introduced to a lady called Fiona who was very excited. She had been attending the alpha course and had been quite sceptical about it all. But she had also had a problem with her left eye for some time, and when she heard the word about the left eye at the end of last week had gone forward for prayer. She sensed that her eye was healed during prayer, but went to the doctor's that week to check. The doctor confirmed that her eye was completely healed, and she had become a Christian that week. She admitted that the whole thing

had blown her away, and she now knew for sure that what was being taught on the alpha course was not just true but totally real.

What I love about that story is how God used several people, each exercising a bit of faith and obedience. He gave one person what's called a 'word of knowledge' i.e. something they couldn't have known, and that person exercised a bit of faith to share with the service leader, who exercised a bit of faith to share it with the congregation, and then someone else prayed for the person, who themselves exercised a bit of faith to come up and ask for prayer.

I also love the fact that the good news was both taught at alpha and then demonstrated through a real-life miracle. This isn't just doctrine – it's real life supernatural living. But it's not dramatic, there's no massed strings in the background or preachers in white suits jumping up and down. It's just incredibly normal. The normal, supernatural life, you could call it.

One more story – a few weeks later, I went back into the prison and met a chap called Bob. Bob was a nice guy in his late 50s (believe it or not, I met lots of nice guys in prison, who'd had terrible upbringings or destructive addictions or made one stupid mistake) but had long term problems with high blood pressure. At the end of the session we asked the group if anyone needed prayer for anything. Bob admitted that his blood pressure was so bad he had permanent tinnitus and the tablets he'd been taking were making no real difference. I remember it was about 8pm, I was really tired and desperate to go home for some food. I remember praying a rubbish prayer – I put my hand on his head and said something like: 'I pray for Bob's blood pressure that you would heal it and when he wakes up in the morning he'll be fine.' Or something like that.

I got a call later in the week from my friend Tim – the next night a different group from church had been in the prison with a different group and was disturbed by banging on the chapel door. When they opened it, it was Bob. He was very excited (unlike Bob I knew) – he'd felt nothing when we'd prayed for him, but sure enough, when he woke the tinnitus was gone (just as we'd prayed). He'd actually had his routine medical check-up that day and his blood pressure was taken. It had halved overnight, and was now what should be expected for a fit young man in his 20s! Bob told the doctor how he'd been prayed for the previous day but the doctor poo-pooed it, saying his medication was doing its job. Things is, he'd been taking the same medication for 10 years.

Key things from that story: (a) there's no technique or right words – I remember that was probably the worst prayer I ever prayed; (b) God answered the prayer exactly – we prayed for overnight healing not immediate, and that's *exactly* what happened; (c) some people will always refuse to believe even with clear evidence – the medication hadn't worked for 3,500 days and then suddenly halved his blood pressure – so it was obviously the medication!

Why have I told you these stories: well, firstly because they are all medically verifiable. Not just a 'feeling' or a 'this possibly happened', in the first case the lump physically disappeared in front of our eyes; in the second his feet shrank 1.5 shoe sizes in a few days; in the latter two, they were confirmed by medical professionals. Too many people trumpet dubious healings which others then discredit and then conclude that this stuff doesn't really happen and we're all charlatans.

Second, they're not about special people. I deliberately picked stories from my own experience, not ones you read in famous books. I can tell you they're true because I was there. I'm a witness.

But I also deliberately picked stories that happened before I was ordained. I was a regular church member like you. I didn't have the special commission. And let's be clear, there's nothing special about me, this is all God. It's not my prayers that did it, or my special powers: Jesus healed all of these people: it's *his* love, *his* power, *he* gets all the glory. But he's quite happy to do this stuff through normal people like you and me. In fact, I've seen far fewer things like this since I got ordained – make of that what you will!

The point is, when you read Acts 2 you're not just reading a historical record that long since ceased to be today's reality. God still shows up now, he is still doing dramatic things. Sadly, a large part of the Western church invented a theology some time ago that taught that these kinds of miracles only happened during the generation of the apostles, and then died out. Pentecost was kind of a generational thing, not a forever thing. But 'Jesus is the same yesterday today and forever.' The problem isn't with Jesus but with our theology. 'Ask and you will receive.' We stopped asking, so we stopped receiving. But we won't ask unless we can exercise a little bit of faith to believe that God still does this stuff today – which is why I'm telling you some of my stories.

And I believe me, I also took some persuading. I spent years resisting the idea that inviting the Holy Spirit to come and do this stuff was a good thing to do. First I was suspicious: when I was 14, my youth leader had a spiritual breakdown publicly in front of the congregation and had to be carried out of the church. I remember saying to myself: if that's what opening yourself to the Holy Spirit does to you, I'm not having any of *that*, thank you very much.

Then I was sceptical. As a student I joined a very conservative church. I owe that church a huge debt in many ways, they formed me in lots of ways I still thank God for – but they were also very clear that this kind of stuff didn't really happen now, and was at best a distraction and at worst dangerous. For 3 years I swallowed that view hook line and sinker, until I began to feel uncomfortable that the God of the bible, which they taught so faithfully, routinely seemed to do this kind of stuff. So why weren't we?

But then I was scared. Just as I was beginning to wonder if my theology was squeezing God into a small box, the so-called Toronto blessing hit the headlines and people were doing bizarre things under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and all my teenage misgivings rose to the surface again.

In the end I just needed to go to a church where this stuff was treated as *normal*, without the drama, to finally see that it was just that – the normal Christian life. Sure, not everyone gets healed, there's a mystery to this stuff. But it goes back to what I've said before: God is Father, Son *and Holy Spirit*. To have a 3D relationship with God we need all 3 dimensions. Without the latter part, it's real but it's 2D – in other words, it's flat.

Pentecost is not just a historical curiosity but a living reality. And it's for everyone: I will refer to one phrase in the passage as I close: v1 'they were all together'. Who's the all? The context takes us back to v15. Not just the apostles, but the whole group of believers. The whole group experienced this. It might be the apostles who spoke and did the upfront stuff, but every believer experienced this at some level. It's the normal, supernatural life. READ v38-39.

HOW TO FINISH??