

Aquitaine 200 Pentecost 2025

It is a great delight for Helen and me to be with you, along with Archdeacon Peter, here at the Abbaye de Sainte-Ferme for what is a whole day of festivities to celebrate 200 years of the Aquitaine chaplaincy and the formal welcoming of John and Jeannie as John is licensed for his new ministry. And what better day to be doing this than Pentecost Sunday. For today we recall the explosion of spiritual energy marked by a rushing wind and tongues of fire, in which God began something new with his people and the early church was born. So our prayer today is that the same Holy Spirit will descend upon our gathering, stir up within us a renewed spiritual fervour and lead this chaplaincy into a new stage and a new era in its life and mission. **Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love!**

We first look back with thankfulness on 200 years of the Aquitaine Chaplaincy. We recall its beginnings in the expatriate ‘colony’ in Bordeaux and its early life at St Nicholas Church, through to recent decades of remarkable expansion and growth. I have known the last three chaplains – Michael Selman, Paul Vrolijk and Tony Lomas, and we are thankful for the different gifts that each of them brought. We are thankful for the abundant signs of life in the chaplaincy over recent years: the fellowship and outreach made possible by the Upper Room at Bertric-Burée, annual women’s retreats, the encouragement of the baptism of 12 young people in the Bordeaux congregation in the past year. This is a chaplaincy where the Holy Spirit has been moving and active in the work of two centuries.

I want to pay especial tribute to those who have sustained the life of this place during the interregnum: churchwardens Tina and Tim, retired

and locum clergy, Readers and Lay Leaders, Church Council and worship group members, for ICS and all who have shared in the prayerful recruitment of a new chaplain. Thank you to each of you!

Now we come to today, and the licensing of a new Chaplain. I enjoyed rereading the person specification you prepared for the recruitment pack. You were looking for a chaplain with **oversight responsibilities** to look after 13 worship centres where there are on average 34 services each month. That person would have two main tasks: first to proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to lead and nurture each congregation. Second, to seek God’s mission for Aquitaine and further develop your vision for the future. There is an inward and an outward dimension to the role. Then there was a sentence, in bold, that I particularly liked, about your openness to change: **‘No Church can preach the Gospel of Christ unless it has been visibly changed by the Gospel.’**

I am struck by how these priorities map so well onto the Pentecostal activity of the Holy Spirit. You see, first of all, the descent of the Spirit turns a group of weak and frightened disciples into confident followers of Jesus and powerful ambassadors for Christ. The Holy Spirit is the dynamic energy of God, and the Spirit’s work is to foster growth and change. So your intentional openness to change in your lives individual and together is a vital prerequisite to the Spirit’s work amongst you.

I notice too how the Spirit’s work on the day of Pentecost has **an inward focus and an outward purpose**. The Spirit descends on the disciples when they are all together in one place, presumably for prayer and worship. The immediate impact of the Spirit is a language miracle – people of all different backgrounds hear their friends

speaking in a language that they can understand. Problems of communication between this group of disciples are overcome. And there is a consequent intensification of Christian fellowship.

Having been filled with the Spirit, the disciples spent much time together in the temple, devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And this starts to affect their economic life, for we read that the believers had all things in common, selling possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to those in need. Pentecost led to a remarkable deepening of fellowship and togetherness as the disciples broke bread, and shared in prayer and worship together.

The Spirit's work at Pentecost draws people in and draws people together. But it also sends people out in mission. There is first of all a rapid growth of the church in Jerusalem. Thousands of people responded to St. Peter's sermon. Day by day, the Lord was adding to the number of the Jerusalem church. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which really should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, then records the remarkable spread of the gospel from Jerusalem all around the Mediterranean as far as Rome, taken by Paul and Barnabas, and Mark and Luke and their colleagues.

This movement of the Spirit recorded in the Book of Acts was like a stone thrown into a pond with the effects rippling onwards and outwards in subsequent ages. So we see subsequent movements of the Spirit in the Celtic Christianity of the 7th and 8th centuries which sent out men like Boniface and Willibrord to Germany and the Netherlands; in the Roman Catholic missionary orders in the middle ages, the spread of Christianity across Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and maybe the spread of the gospel in China today.

In your chaplaincy role you wrote about an openness to change, a desire for the building up of community life and the seeking after fresh vision for mission. This is what the Holy Spirit came to bring on the day of Pentecost and what the Holy Spirit is still bringing today. Aquitaine chaplaincy is today caught up in the Spirit's mission and we wait with eagerness to see where the Spirit will take you.

To be at the forefront of that, John, with Jeannie, has been chosen to be your pastor and guide. His is a ministry of oversight. He needs to be able to 'see over' the whole chaplaincy, like someone on a watchtower, looking out over worship centres that famously cover an area the size of Wales. But the Christian overseer is not up in an ivory tower, he must also be in the trenches leading the troops from the front, leading their engagement with the world. That is what makes it such a demanding role.

In John, I can say that you have an outstanding leader. Born and raised in Pakistan, having served in contexts ranging from majority Muslim to rural private school chaplain, John has a deep and entrepreneurial faith. He is used to leading a large team of clergy and lay people. He is passionate about preaching the gospel and growing the church.

So on this Pentecost Sunday, I - with us all - give thanks for 200 years of the Aquitaine Chaplaincy. I am thankful for the team of ministers lay and ordained who have served here and for recent chaplains who have led them. I celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit in building community and empowering mission. And I look forward in great eagerness and anticipation to all that God will do in and through John and Jeannie and to the growth and flourishing of this chaplaincy for many years to come.