First we’ll place the events of Pentecost in their historical setting;
then look at the survival and growth of the early church under the influence of the Holy Spirit
and finally a message for to-day

Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost (about 30CE)

Had been rebuilt by Herod (trying to gain favour with the Romans) It consisted off a walled city enclosing about 1 sq mile on a plateau. There were 2 parts to the city = the upper and the lower: In the lower lived most of the 25,000 inhabitants – small businesses, traders, farmers (who went out each day beyond the city walls to their olive groves or small holdings etc; in the upper were the palatial residences of senior Roman officials, members of the Sanhedrin etc. And located there was the rebuilt Temple (the previous temple of Solomon had been destroyed by Nebucznezzah some hundred of years before.

At this time the Temple on Temple Mount – according to current Judaic practice – was where God lived. And practicing Jews were required to make a pilgrimage at least 3 times a year at the time of the Festivals to worship and bring offerings. At the time of Pilgrimage the population of the city would increase 3-4 fold with pilgrims from all round the region. With a small area the city would be crowded and abuzz with people from distant parts.

And so it was for the festival of Pentecost which is the Greek name given to Shavuot - the Feast of the Weeks, a Jewish pilgrimage Festival held seven weeks – on the fiftieth day – after Passover. Shavuot is known also as "the Day of the First Fruits", because it was the time Jewish farmers from far and wide would bring their first harvest to Jerusalem as a token of thanksgiving. They would be welcomed at the city gates with music and dancing and process to the Temple.

And this was the scene for the astounding events recorded in Acts 2 by Luke recording the birth of the Christian church. How then did this infant church (a handful of frightened followers huddling in an upper room) develop into the lusty squalling toddler (1 million Christians) of the end of the first century?

It is useful to contrast this survival with another splinter group of mainstream Judaism at this time. The Essenes – or the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls - had withdrawn to
an isolated locality some distance from Jerusalem in protest against the laxity and corruption they saw in the Temple. They awaited the coming of the messiah while observing the strictest of ritual behaviour. But for them – wiped out by the Romans in 68AD and nothing - until a shepherd boy made a chance discovery of a scroll in 1948.

The answer to the survival of the sect of Judaism that became the Christian church is that it happened through an extraordinary chain of improbable events some of which are recorded by Luke. (Now although we call the book “The Acts of the Apostles’ it could be more aptly renamed “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” since Luke records as his dominant theme the power of the Spirit manifested in and through the members of the early church – in its founding and development).

- Undoubtedly the most significant decision for survival was to take the message to the Gentiles and Acts records the mission journeys of Paul and Barnabas and others throughout the Mediterranean. Paradoxically it was the good roads and the sea routes of the Roman oppressors that enabled this to happen.
- Another was to take no part in the Judaeo-Roman war of 66-68AD when the slaughter of the Jewish people was as thorough and barbaric as ever recorded. In fact they fled to Syria.
- Paul concentrated his missionary effort on an outer circle of ‘enquirers’ associated with the synagogues. (Christians were not separated from mainstream Judaism until 85 CE – Paul was martyred in Rome about 65 CE)

The Characteristics that attracted people to the Christian faith were:

- A close knit society
- Charitable behaviour to the poor, widows, orphans, prisoners,
- Their hospitality and generosity
- Respect accorded all regardless of race, gender, slave or free

By 100 CE it is estimated that there were 1 million professing Christians. This was 0.6% of the ‘world population” All from 3000 on the day of Pentecost.

AND TO-DAY

On that first Pentecost morning, there was a new sense of mission. The Holy Spirit had enabled them to move out of the cowering huddle in the Upper Room and boldly
proclaim to family, friends, neighbours, and visitors to Jerusalem the impact that Jesus Christ had on their daily lives.

There was also a new sense of community. The story of the Tower of Babel we heard was about the breakdown of community even to the point of not understanding each other’s language, but with coming of the Holy Spirit this was reversed. *Amazed and astonished we hear, each of us, in our own native language? -- Acts 2:7-8.*

Just what factually happened we’ll never really know but the point of Pentecost is that the gift of tongues is about realising that God’s love extends to all – we are all one community under God. The gift of tongues is not so much the ability to speak in Aramaic or Greek or Tagalog or Arabic. It is the ability to speak Baby, to speak Child, to be fluent in teenager, to know the language of Seniors and of the X and Y Generation. The Holy Spirit opens the way to speak with body language and music and compassion and caring, with smiles and tears, with all communication that spans words and worlds. No one present is excluded from this display of God’s grace.

If that was the dream, the Spirit-filled Pentecost dream, it has yet to be realised. The noise and wind of that long-ago event offer a fiery reminder of the work we have cut out for us. There is unfinished Pentecost business, globally and right here at home. When the differences among human beings will be seen not as barriers and threats, but as parts of a whole. - one community.

Mind you, The Spirit does not always manifest in flames and wind. There is power in a seed. It can split concrete, change the foundations of a building, all very quietly and unobtrusively. The gentle touch of a baby has the power to change the lives of parents. The gentle impact of non-violence -- Rosa Parks, for instance-- has the power to wake up a nation.

The Holy Spirit empowers the church to be the agent of change in the world, a counter-cultural entity. The task of the church is to breathe in the Spirit and be inspired by the Spirit to act on behalf of God.

But the church has been waiting to exhale far too long. As the Spirit of God flows into us, it also ought to flow from us: in the way we treat one another, the way we speak to one another, in the way we treat others in our community, in the way we live out the new life we receive when we follow Jesus.

Thanks be to God for Pentecost. Let us use it well.