

Art and reflection for the Celebration of Pentecost – prepared by Dr Sophia Errey

Acts 2

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Familiar words – but how do you envisage this amazing event?

Tongues (as) of fire might be quite familiar to us... but how would you represent a sound “like the rush of a violent wind”? (or in the King James translation “a “rushing mighty wind”). In France one tradition was to represent this by sounding a trumpet.

Early images of Pentecost, and those in the Orthodox tradition tend to emphasize the very solemn aspect of the coming of the Spirit, and hence tend to be relatively static, almost frozen, as in this Russian icon.



Interestingly, Mary is very prominent in many of these images. The words “all together” comprehend the earlier verses in Acts 13-14 which were read last Sunday,

13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

In Jerusalem the Cenacle (upper room/room upstairs) is pointed out as the site where they were gathered.



In contemporary images the tendency has been to evoke the overwhelming disruption to stasis involved, using a more or less abstract whirlwind of colour and movement, as in these two examples kindly supplied by Fr Harry.



The Shrine of St Richard, in Chichester Cathedral, with tapestry designed by Ursula Benker-Schirmir (2011). (The tapestry uses many symbols associated with St Richard (d. 1253), but its overall "rock crystal" structure and prominent flame associate it with the gifts of the Spirit).



Pentecost Window, Collegiate Church, Vernon, Normandy

Another recent image which has been much reproduced is that on the dome of the Cathedral Basilica of St Louis, Missouri.

Between 1912 and 1988 mosaics were installed throughout the Cathedral – like our own end wall, this revives a technique very popular in church decoration from the 6th to 14th centuries, because of its beauty and stability. The mosaics collectively contain 41.5 million glass *tesserae* pieces in more than 7,000 colours. Dozens of workers were involved over time – for father and son team Paul and Arno Heuduck it occupied practically their whole working life.

The dome mosaic with Pentecost (below) was designed by Jan Henryk de Rosen.



Perhaps El Greco, combining, as he did, a grounding in Orthodox art traditions with the emotion and intensity of Western art after the Renaissance, provides us with a most powerful representation of Pentecost.