

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 8 June 2025 – Pentecost (Year C)

Who are we?

Do you remember ‘Back to Basics’? For those who don’t, or who weren’t even born then, it was a campaign launched by the then Prime Minister, John Major, after this election victory in 1992, to recall the Conservative Party to the fundamental principles of its philosophy, one of which was family values. Alas, it very quickly backfired as a string of sex scandals engulfed the party and paved the way for Tony Blair’s victory five years later. It wasn’t what John Major intended. But sometimes, in all the rush which affects church life as much as it does the rest of it we need to pause and take our bearings, so that the next stage of the journey will have a better chance of being on the right track. Today, the day of Pentecost, when the Church was born and when we have experienced the joy of receiving three new members, is a good one for reminding us of why we are here, what we stand for, and how we try to put into practice what we say we believe.

Let’s begin with the here and now. Christians gather for worship each Sunday because it is the day of resurrection and the new Sabbath, a day of rest and refreshment of the spirit. They do so in countless different ways, from the very informal and charismatic to the highly ritualistic. We have our own tradition, somewhere in between, not static, but evolving in response to all that is going on around us. It has a flexibility and a freedom we don’t always make the best use of but always rooted in what for shorthand we call the Word and the Sacraments. We gather round the Scriptures and hear them expounded to listen for the word of God speaking to us. Let’s be honest. It doesn’t always happen. Sometimes we find the Bible difficult, off-putting, alien to our way of thinking, but at other times a word or a phrase can leap from the page and hit home. We don’t regard the words printed on the page as some kind of infallible oracle delivered to us by God to tell us what we must think about any issue; we have God-given minds and we are called to use them. So we don’t take texts or stories in isolation, we pay attention to how they relate to their context – both what comes before and after them and the context in which they were written down so many centuries ago. We stand by the unity of Scripture, in both

Testaments, and celebrate its diversity, because it speaks of despair as well as hope, of evil as well as good, of the abuse of religion as well as religion's truths. We are not afraid of scholarship or science even when they challenge our thinking, but rejoice in the discoveries they make, for we believe, as the old hymn has it, that 'the Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy word'. That word needs to be rightly discerned and interpreted, and that is the work of the Holy Spirit – to bring it to life in our midst and stimulate our response.

Our worship is shaped by the Gospel. We begin with a call and a welcome because Jesus called his disciples and never turned away anyone who came to him. We pray that we may be open to the presence of God but also come before God conscious of our own failures in confession and to hear how forgiveness is the balm which heals wounds and helps us to live as compassionate and creative people. When the liturgy of the word in Scripture and sermon is over we make our response, in the offering of all we do and are and in prayer for a world which is so full of hurt and violence. In our hymns we give voice to our praise and thanksgiving, and we use music, art and poetry to speak to us in ways which everyday words cannot. Each month we go to the Upper Room to share in the meal which Jesus shared with his first disciples before his arrest and execution. This takes us to the defining moment of our faith, when everything the followers of Jesus had hoped and longed for seems lost for ever, only for them to discover that he comes to them in their darkest moment as a risen presence, with the gift of the Spirit to continue his work of healing and reconciliation. Some people feel they aren't good enough to receive the sacrament, but you've only got to look at who was there at the first Lord's Supper to recognise that people who often got things wrong and who would deny or even betray Christ were sitting there with him. From time to time, too, we share in the other sacrament of the Lord, baptism, when babies, children and adults come to be incorporated into the Christian family through the waters of rebirth.

To worship God in Christ through the Spirit with others on the pilgrim way is one expression of our life together. But it is only part of the story, because we belong to a community of disciples called to live out its faith in grounded and practical ways. We look after one another, especially at times when members of the community are

suffering; but we are not inward-looking, because we reach outwards, too, into our local communities and far beyond, by trying to help in ways which make a real difference to the lives of people we may not know but who, we believe, are every bit as much children of God as any of us. Some of this is evident in the projects we are engaged in, at home and abroad, but much of it goes on in a more hidden way, in mutual support and care. Life isn't always smooth. We've had our bumpy moments, when disagreements threatened our fellowship, but we have ridden them out in love for one another. While we will not always agree about what faithful discipleship means, we know that we have a higher loyalty than to our own opinions, which is to our life in Christ and his command that we love one another. That is the true measure of discipleship. When it comes to mission, we don't engage in aggressive evangelistic campaigns and tell people what they must believe. Our experience has taught us that if we preach the Gospel faithfully and build a community which tries to live by the values Christ has taught us, of openness and welcome, of forgiveness and generosity of spirit, people will respond. Christ's call never comes to us as a demand or preys on our fear and guilt; it is always an invitation. As George Herbert wrote in one of his most famous poems – inscribed on a stone in this church – Love bade me welcome.

But there's a much larger picture, too. This congregation began its life towards the end of the eighteenth century as a daughter church of New Road Baptist Church in Oxford, though it adopted a Congregationalist identity until the URC came into being in 1972. We are a tiny part not just of our own denomination but of the church throughout the world, stretching back to the first Pentecost and uniting people of every kind of background and culture in the love and service of Christ. Luke describes how the confusion of tongues in the old tale of the Tower of Babel gives way to a day in which there is mutual understanding between people from different backgrounds and cultures. The division of that one family into churches which are often suspicious of one another, or which exclude other Christians from sharing fully in their life, is one of the most painful barriers to the work of the Gospel today. How can we preach reconciliation to warring nations if we cannot be reconciled first to one another? I rejoice that in our congregation we have people from many different Christian traditions, and none. Becoming a member here does not mean rejecting everything

you bring from your past. My own faith journey has been moulded by Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox witness as well as my Jewish inheritance and my Free Church upbringing. Though we mark our anniversary each year and though we identify ourselves as belonging to the Reformed family of churches, our life did not begin in 1797 or at the Reformation. It began on the first day of Pentecost. We have a thousand years of shared history with the Eastern Churches, before the Great Schism in the eleventh century, and fifteen hundred years with the Western Roman Catholic Church, and the riches of that past are treasures we continue to value and explore. The members we have received today into this particular congregation are first and foremost members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. That's important. There can only be one Church of Christ, which means we are called to continue the work of reconciliation where Christ's body has been divided. It is holy because we are called to live by the values which Christ has shown us, which we believe bring hope and healing to a grievously wounded world. It is catholic, which means universal, so our faith must never be nationalistic or exclusive. It is apostolic because we are continually nourished by the Gospel and by the witness of all those faithful Christians who have walked in its way.

We are all, as John reminded us last week, a work in progress. There are aspects of our life together which are incomplete. My prayer, in which I call you to join me, is that God will continue to send honest seekers and new disciples to this little community of Christians, so that our worship can be enriched and our service and mission become ever more effective, because the healing balm of Christ is so desperately needed in the broken lives and broken communities around us, and wherever hatred and violence hold sway. I pray, and I hope you will too, that we may become more diverse, in age range and in background, because we need the fresh perspectives and energies young people and people from different cultures can bring if we are to be built up into the fulness of Christ. We are called, as a prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila has it (though I've never found it in her writings) to be the hands and feet, the eyes and ears of Christ in the world around us. That is the work of a lifetime, and even those of us who've been engaged in it for a long time feel we have only just begun. That's what this church, any church, is for. Not to lull us into a false

sense of comfort but to open our minds and our hearts to the Holy Spirit of God, leading us on to new light, new births of grace, new songs of the divine love which has given itself in Christ to bring living water to those who thirst and to fill the hungry with the bread of life.