

## Pentecost 2020

How can there be a quiet Pentecost? The narrative from the Acts of the Apostles presents anything but. Having been told by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Spirit, the disciples are gathered together on the day of Pentecost – fifty days after the Passover. They hear the sound of a rushing mighty wind, they see tongues as of fire descending upon them, and they are enabled to preach the word and the works of God in the languages of every people under heaven. This is a feast of noise, of proclamation, of shouting, of tumult. And rightly so, for at this Feast of Pentecost we are celebrating the gift of the Spirit – the life of God himself – poured out upon the world in the grace of creation and redemption. The very act of bringing things into being is an act of speaking – Let there be light. The divine word leaps forth into the silence of nothingness, and life – all life – is the result.

Christmas begins with a night-time mass, with stillness and hushed awe. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. Easter begins with a vigil – confronted with the silent darkness of death, we proclaim the light of Christ, a single candle which quietly and gradually spreads its light throughout the church and throughout the world. But Pentecost is noisy, it is marked by declamation and protestation so excited and exciting that those who are present conclude that drunkenness must be the cause. This is God speaking to the world in the raucous singing of the ale house.

But this year, there is no singing, raucous or otherwise. Indeed, there are no ale houses either. No shouting, no corporate prayer, no glorious music, no joyful proclamation. Or at least, none of these things in their usual form. Instead, we have a quiet Pentecost, as we gather in our homes, alone or with only our families, and as we read of the disciples' being intoxicated with the Spirit we must find their antics as

far from us in our current experience as they are distant from us in time.

This, then, is a different Pentecost. But perhaps not as different as it needs to be, because the crash bang wallop aspect of the Spirit is just that, one aspect. Look at our gospel reading. Like the story in Acts chapter two, it is an account of the giving of the Spirit. But it is a very different account. Jesus, on the day of his resurrection, appears to the disciples in the upper room. They are gathered together in lockdown and in hiding, but his presence brings them the gift of peace, and also the outbreathing of the Spirit of life which will animate the church which is nascent in these first disciples. No rushing mighty wind here, just the breath of Jesus, and the simple words “Receive the Holy Spirit”. This is the Spirit of intimacy, the breath of God which lives in each one of us and is the basis of our Christian lives, indeed of our very existence.

We need to remember that the Spirit is not something new at this point in the story of salvation. Rather, the Spirit is the beginning of that story – the opening verses of Genesis tell us that the earth was without form and void and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. That life giving Spirit which brings something from nothing is the agent of divine creation. What the spirit is, is the breath which every living thing takes for granted just by living. The Christian feast of Pentecost exists to remind us that that creative spirit works out the divine plan in the life of the church and of all Christian people.

To learn this lesson, we do well to recall the origins of Pentecost – the great Jewish of Shavuot, the feast of Weeks, which has a double aspect. As a harvest festival, it celebrates the offering of the grain, newly harvested, to the presence of the Lord in his temple. Later in Jewish tradition and practice, it came to celebrate also the moment of the giving of the Law on Sinai, the act in which God entrusts his chosen people

with the mechanism by which they are able to live in love and covenant with him, and to show to the world what it means to follow the only true God. This double aspect – the fruits of the earth and the gift of divine revelation – maps perfectly on to the Christian understanding of the Spirit – the creative love of God which is manifest in a new and particular way through the redemption of the world in Jesus Christ and the life of the church which is his body.

It is that first aspect, the Spirit as creator and sustainer, that we are apt to take for granted. This is scarcely surprising – if we were constantly to stop and give thank for the fact that we are breathing, we would find practical living something of a challenge. The awfulness of the current crisis is found not least in the fact that that gift of breath is lost to those who are afflicted. We who live and breathe should celebrate life to the fullest extent. But we celebrate life by living it, not by staring up at the sky and telling God that he is even better than a superhero.

This chapel from which I am preaching was long thought – wrongly – to have been built by a nearby Carmelite community. That great monastic tradition takes its name from the site of Elijah’s defeat of the priests of Baal – hence the statue of Elijah on the outside of the chapel, added in 1913 by a generation who believed our little local myth, a myth enshrined in the name of the alley – Friars Entry – opposite the church. Perhaps the best known of all the Elijah stories takes place on another mountain, Horeb, when he hears the voice of the Lord not in earthquake, wind or fire, but in a still, small voice, the gentle murmuring of the divine which displays the intimacy of the Lord’s relationship with his chosen. Note that word intimacy: this is not about God being gentle and cuddly – his instructions to Elijah are anything but. More important, is the closeness with which God dwells with his people and from which he imparts the truth of the creator.

It is that closeness, that intimacy, of the Spirit of Life which we celebrate this Pentecost. In our isolation and our confinement, we are enabled nevertheless to rejoice at the gift of God which pours itself out in creation and which unites us to the life of Christ and the self-giving of the Trinity, the giving of love which is the Holy Spirit itself. There is no noise, no blazing, no drunkenness, no shout: just the quietly insistent voice of love, the candle which burns and will not be extinguished. And this is the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit – that life itself is the gift of the love of God.