

Pentecost 2018

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I wonder what people outside this building think we are doing today. Have those who wait at the bus stops across the road, who pop into Tesco for a croissant for breakfast, or who take selfies on the steps of Martyrs' Memorial any idea of what we are celebrating today? Many of our great Christian festivals still remain in our culture as secular holidays. Pentecost, known as Whitsun for many centuries in England and Ireland, was often marked by informal holidays and special local celebrations. Even in the recent past in the North West of England the cotton mills normally gave their workers time off after the Sunday, and provided the opportunity for the great Whit Walks organized by the churches. But Whitsun has all but disappeared from our secular calendar now; and what used to be Whit Monday, an official holiday for a hundred years, was transformed into the Late Spring Bank Holiday from 1971. There is no commercial leverage in Pentecost; and that leaves us who bear the name of Christ and observe the Feast free to ponder its meaning.

We celebrate today the gift of the Holy Spirit to the first disciples, and to all subsequent followers of Christ: the gift of the spirit of God, the spirit of Christ himself – as he had promised before his death. He assured his closest friends that he would not leave them as orphans - without the strength and guidance of his presence. We read in John's gospel, a little earlier than our gospel for today, "I will not leave you orphaned: I am coming to you Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." "... the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you." (John 14: 18 ff.) Through the Pentecost gift of the Spirit God fulfils his promise to love and live the divine life within those who love Him, to make his home with them, and to teach them. "Them" of course includes us, here and now. Without the Holy Spirit there would be no church, no body of Christ on earth animated by his Spirit – just a stumbling and sometimes corrupt human institution. Without the Holy Spirit we would as individual Christians be in a

parlous state, lacking that steady strength, guidance and grace which enable us to grow in the Christian life. So – what a gift we celebrate today! And there is absolutely no doubt that the indwelling Spirit is given to all Christians. Not one of us is left out. As a much younger Christian – in years and experience – I sometimes wondered if perhaps I had missed out on the gift. I never spoke with tongues, or even had a dramatic conversion experience, and I went on struggling with doubt and sin. It took a while for the real truth to sink in – that the Spirit is given to all Christians in baptism and confirmation, and one's feelings and doubts and fears make absolutely no difference to this bedrock truth of our Christian lives.

The early Christians, rooted in Jewish scripture, would have found the idea of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God, very familiar. They would have read or heard read in the synagogues of the spirit as God's creative force in the great Genesis story of the beginning of the world. They knew that their Kings and Prophets had been filled with the spirit; and that God had promised to pour out his spirit on his people in the last days. There is that wonderful passage in the prophet, Joel (ch.2, vv.28-29) when God promises to pour out his spirit on all flesh – on men and women, on the old and the young, and even on slaves. And of course in Ezekiel we have the vision of the valley of dry bones representing the people of Israel. When the prophet called breath into them they stood up and lived, a vast multitude; and God said, 'this is what I shall do.' "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

The early Christians after Pentecost recognised that the Holy Spirit was the Spirit of Christ himself at work in them. It was that Spirit which actively and palpably guided them in what they should or should not do. The Spirit empowered them, when often they were weak and frightened. The Spirit taught them what they should say when they stood up in front of those who ridiculed or persecuted them. The Spirit's presence in each one of them and in their community as a whole was God's self-manifestation in their very human lives. The love of God, redeeming and recreating fallen humanity, once so evident in the earthly life of Jesus, was now let loose in the world in power and also in profound intimacy. The promise that God would make his home in those who love him now made sense and was fulfilled through the indwelling presence of God's spirit.

There were at times some exotic manifestations of the Spirit, particularly speaking in foreign languages or unknown tongues. But as the Christian communities settled down to live the Christian life they had to learn what the fruits of the Spirit looked like in daily life. Paul warned the Corinthian Christians, there should be no competitive spirituality, no thinking that the more dramatic gifts were to be desired: all gifts were needed in the church for the building up of the body of Christ. And of course, the greatest gift was Love. Towards the end of the great passage in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul wrote about the very practical, self-effacing nature of Love – here was nothing dramatic, flashy or showy: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (vv.4-5) Or again to the Galatian Christians he underlined the social nature of the fruits of the Spirit in individual lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (ch.5: 22) These were the qualities which would build up the body of Christ on earth. They showed the on-going conversion of individual lives as Christ lived his own life in them.

Bearing the name of Christ, living the Christian life, for us as for those first Christians, is not about signing up to a set of beliefs. The most helpful images are scriptural ones of abiding and following – the image of intimate relationship with Christ (*Abide in me as I abide in you. I am the vine, you are the branches.* John 15:4-5); or the image of the Way, the earliest name for the Christian life, echoing another great I Am saying, “*I am the way, the truth and the life.*” John 14:6.) But how do we follow that Way? How do we grow in that relationship of intimacy with Christ? This is not something we can do in our own strength, however determined we may be. Our achievement-orientated culture cruelly betrays us here. In abiding and following, the work is that of the Holy Spirit in us: these are not things we can do ourselves. Our task is acceptance and cooperation –painfully and slowly becoming malleable in the hands of God. In particular we have to learn to develop a listening heart.

I am deliberately mixing metaphors here; for listening to the Holy Spirit is not primarily about hearing with the ears, but at a far deeper level within ourselves attending to the Spirit. It takes faith and practice, but slowly we come to hear and sense what the Spirit might be teaching us or prompting us to do. Mostly the prompting is like little nudges: it can be a powerful gale of pressure.

But how do we grow a listening heart? How do we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit. Mercifully we do not have to re-invent the wheel. The holy people of God who have gone before us have marked out practices which will open us up to the promised gift. First and foremost there are the sacraments – those great gifts which are the means of grace and the hope of glory, to quote the Prayer Book’s General Thanksgiving. Each of them is a means of the inflowing of the Holy Spirit into Christian lives, working in us at a deeper level than we can begin to understand. Of course Baptism and Confirmation are the foundational sacraments of Christian life: the Spirit is given to create a new and indelible identity - being of and in Christ. Ordination and Marriage are also about invoking the Spirit on individuals to create a new person and empower for new roles. The Mass, the Holy Eucharist, has so many layers of meaning. It is of course regular food for the journey of our Christian lives, but as we are united with Christ, it is a reiteration of the presence of the spirit of God in the deepest parts of our human identity. And Reconciliation and Anointing for healing pour out the mercy and grace of God on the specifics of an individual’s sin and distress and need, through the power of the inflowing Spirit. If we avoid the Sacraments or treat them lightly we do so at our peril – that is, if we are serious about developing a listening heart.

Personal disciplines and practice also play a part in helping us to listen. I purposely say “personal” rather than “individual” – because none of us is an individual in our Christian life. We are part of each other as the body of Christ on earth, and what we do or fail to do affects the rest of the body. So regular personal prayer is of great importance; it does not matter really what we feel or don’t feel – we have to turn up for the sake of the body as a whole as well as for ourselves and our particular Christian journey. Quiet reflection on scripture and other literature, which grounds and grows our faith and our capacity to listen, is in a sense part of a wider pattern of prayer. And

then as we mature in faith it is likely that we shall seek out spiritual direction, and work with what was called in these islands over a thousand years ago a “soul friend”. The task of such a friend is to help us listen, and to become more aware of the work of the Holy Spirit within us, and to become more cooperative with the Spirit, more malleable in the hand of God. For the presence and work of the Spirit are to grow the life of Christ in us; in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, “until all of us come to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13)

Our calling is nothing less than abiding in Christ so that God may live His life in us. Life empowered, purified and illumined by the Spirit, is pre-eminently life lived within the love of God. In Paul’s words to the Romans, the love of God is poured out on men and women through His Spirit. (Romans 5.5) The Spirit becomes at home deep within the hearts and lives of those who love God, transforming, renewing and strengthening us, fashioning the life of Christ in us. So in awe and hope and love, let us celebrate this glorious feast day.

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