

St Mary Magdalen, Oxford

Pentecost 2019

Pentecost is one of my favourite Feasts of the church – perhaps the best of them all. This is partly because the secular world cannot really hijack this feast or trivialise it into fluffy spirituality. We know what has happened to the Feast of the Incarnation in our secular, consumer society. Indeed I am sure that if you spoke of the Feast of the Incarnation to most people they would not have a ghost of an idea what you meant. For them Christmas is about parties, eating and drinking, presents and families. Even Easter has been partially sidelined into chocolate eggs, chicks, bunnies, hares and the rest. But the main reason why I love Pentecost is that it is such a profound theological feast – one which leads us into deep truths about God’s way of dealing with those who seek to follow him. I admit - Pentecost is sometimes seen as problematic or even remote, even by deeply committed Christians. It is perhaps difficult for those of us, particularly Anglicans, who are embedded in a rather reticent culture where religious enthusiasm is somewhat suspect; where we would feel uncomfortable with some of the dramatic manifestations of Christians from more charismatic traditions. So what do we celebrate today and why should we celebrate?

We celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the very spirit of God himself, to the first disciples – and so of course to us. From then on the work of that spirit is the way the presence of Christ becomes a reality in Christian lives, both as individual Christians and as the community of the church. Pentecost lets Christ loose in the world beyond the limitations of time and space which confined his earthly presence, and even his post-Resurrection experiences. The writer of John’s gospel made this clear in his wonderful picture of Mary Magdalen meeting Christ the gardener. When the grieving Mary at last realises that this is no ordinary gardener but the Lord himself, she longs to hold him, to assure herself of his reality. But he tells her not to hold on to him – not because it was unconventional, or culturally suspect, but because he has not yet ascended to the Father. “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” (John 20:17) It is his earthly departure which will let loose his life in the world, which will make him available to all those who love him unbounded by time and space.

Early Christians as God-fearing Jews who were familiar with their scriptures would have had a lively understanding of the Spirit of God at work in the world. They knew from their history and their prophets and poets that the spirit of God was alive and active in the world - creating, bringing new life, guiding and empowering. One of the most powerful expositions of this belief in the power of God's spirit is in the book of Ezekiel. (ch.37) The spirit of the Lord took the prophet into a valley full of dry bones: he was told to prophesy to the bones and the bones came together with a rattling sound and flesh and skin covered them. But they only stood up and lived when God's spirit or breath was breathed upon them. "...and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." (Ezek. 37: 10) Pentecost brought all this understanding together in a new experience, not just in their people's history, but at the very personal level of their own lives, and in their new little community of the friends of Jesus, The spirit was at work doing just these things – bringing new life, guiding and empowering.

But the first Christians' experience of the Spirit was totally tied up with Christ himself – the way he continued to be present to them though no longer visible, to guide, empower, bring new life, and indeed to live his own life within them. In the words of Paul or a close follower, writing to the Colossian Christians, the great mystery of the faith is "Christ in you the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27) The writer of John echoes this theme of intimacy and common life between Christ and those who love him and abide in him in the famous passage describing Christ as the Vine, and his followers as the branches: separated from the Vine the branches have no life at all and bear no fruit. Or again the same writer uses the image of Christ and the Father coming to make their home with those who believe and love them. (John chs 14 & 15)

But what does this mean? Of course it means many things at many levels in our Christian experience; but if Christ makes his home in us, then we become more Christ-like, more conformed to the pattern of his life, death and resurrection, more hollowed out and filled with the spirit of Christ himself. This surely lies behind some of the greatest of Paul's teaching in the letter to the Roman Christians in which he contrasts their old lives and the lives now made possible through Christ: and when he

wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” Romans 12:2) Or as a modern theologian put it, “All the power and self-giving of God that went into the crucifixion and resurrection is perpetually present in the Holy Spirit, and so is perpetually present to all of us who receive it.” (James Alison, *Knowing Jesus*)

The pattern of Christ’s life is the pattern ours must also take. But it is only by the power of the spirit that our lives can be renewed and transformed. What is at stake can be summed up simply as:

Incarnation

Passion and Death

Resurrection

We tend to think of the Incarnation primarily as the taking of our human flesh by God himself in the person of Christ. But of course it is far more than this one life in time. It is a constant outpouring of God’s love and grace into our human existence, meeting us in everything we see and do, and in all places and through all people. Further, we are called in response to be the dwelling of God himself, the body of Christ himself in our own time and place. Many of you will know the wonderful meditation by Teresa of Avila which I know I have quoted before in the church. “*Christ has no body now on earth but yours...*”

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which He looks with

Compassion on this world,

Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,

Yours are the eyes, you are His body.

Christ has no body now but yours.

This has enormous and profound implications for our lives. Just try walking the streets of Oxford and looking around you, or travelling on a bus and train, or watching the news and something of the enormity of our calling will begin to dawn on us – if we

really are called to be the body of Christ in this place, looking at its people with his eyes, and doing his work among them.

For Christ himself, a life which was God's own self-giving led to the Passion and to the Cross. In our own lives, and in that of the church, we are also called to experience the pain of the world, its sin and its alienation from God – as well as our personal sin and rebellion against God. We have in a sense to die to all those habits and values, certainties and comforts which the world around us may provide: to be hollowed out so that we may be filled with the spirit and power of Christ. And in this lies resurrection – being called out like Lazarus from the tomb. Or as in the words which the writer of John puts into the mouth of Jesus “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” (John 12: 24-6)

The greatness of our calling may leave us paralysed and doubtful. We may say and sing of the power of the Holy Spirit. But many of us may harbour fears and doubts. Does all this really mean me, too? My religion is quiet and sober – does this mean I am not spirit-filled? Faced with this sort of nagging fear it is good to remember Paul's insistence that the fruits of the spirit are indeed rather quiet and sober, and very social, working for the good of the whole community – rather than being flamboyant signs of individual spiritual athleticism. As he told the Galatians, “... *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” (Gal. 5: 22)

Of course we cannot work this miracle of deepening Christ-likeness ourselves. It is the work of the spirit, the indwelling of Christ himself in us. This is what we proclaim and receive in the Eucharist – every time we celebrate this great Sacrament of Christ's love and presence in our lives: but particularly on this great day of Pentecost.