

Readings for the Day of Pentecost

23rd May 2021

First Reading: Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Second Reading: Romans 8:22-27

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Gospel: St John 15:26-27, 16:4-15

Jesus spoke to his disciples: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

A Reflection for the Day of Pentecost

During my training for ministry, we had a couple of residential weekends at the College of the Holy Spirit on the Isle of Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde. It is adjacent to the Cathedral of the Isles - which is well worth a visit if you get the opportunity. It is supposedly the smallest cathedral in Britain, although that is a claim it shares with St Asaph in Wales. The College was once, briefly, a training college for clergy, and it now provides accommodation and retreats. In the North College, the rooms are named for the fruits of the Spirit as given in Galatians chapter 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness and...well, thankfully not self-control... Can you imagine being allocated a room called self-control? They used the more traditional 'fortitude' instead. At our weekends, there was a certain amount of good-natured banter about the appropriateness or otherwise of our room allocation. This memory always comes to mind when we come to the Day of Pentecost each year and think specifically about the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Jewish festival of Shavuot originated as the Feast of Weeks that we find in the Old Testament, a time of harvest thanksgiving for God's faithfulness and gifts. It also developed into thanksgiving for the gift of the Torah or Law, specifically the Ten Commandments. In Greek, it was referred to as Pentecost, meaning 'fiftieth' because it occurs fifty days after the first day of Passover. The Christian festival of Pentecost is so called because the events that we mark took place at the time of this Jewish festival.

Last Sunday, one of the purposes of Jesus' Ascension that we thought about was to make way for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is even more explicit about this, saying that if he does not go away, the Holy Spirit, translated here as Advocate, will not come. He says that this will be to the disciples' advantage – something that they must have found particularly difficult to comprehend before the event. At the Ascension, Jesus

commissioned the disciples to preach the Gospel message to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. Today, in the passage from Acts, we hear of Peter beginning to do just that: in Jerusalem, preaching to people from many nations.

In the readings set for today, the Holy Spirit is described in a variety of ways and with a number of different roles. In the passage from Acts, the Holy Spirit came as wind and fire. The Spirit is described in different places as wind, breath and spirit. Wind: conveying the power and purpose of God. Breath: giving life to God's people. Spirit: literally inspiring, equipping and empowering God's people to live the Christian life. Fire links the Spirit with God's judgment, and the description of tongues of fire links with the speech in many different tongues or languages that was inspired. Elsewhere, the Holy Spirit is an encourager, a comforter, a guide, a helper, a teacher. Sometimes, the Spirit is seen as being gentle and mysterious, portrayed as descending like a dove on Jesus at his baptism. At other times it is far more obvious – hard to miss, like the tongues of fire and the rushing wind. The Celtic Christians' symbol for the Holy Spirit – the wild goose – is loud and demanding, even aggressive at times.

The Greek word used for the Holy Spirit in the Gospel is Paraclete. In the King James version it was translated Comforter, with the understanding that to comfort meant to strengthen. One colleague told me of a scene in the Bayeux Tapestry with an inscription that can be translated as 'Bishop Odo comforts his troops'. It shows him urging the troops forward into battle with a raised club!

In the more modern NRSV that we now use in church, Paraclete is translated as Advocate. Jesus promises his disciples that he will send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with them. Just as Jesus embodied God's presence with humanity while he was on earth, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit will be God's presence among humans anywhere and at any time. John's Gospel is full of courtroom imagery, so 'Advocate' is used in the legal sense here: someone who speaks on behalf of another, not so much to protect them as to further their cause. The Holy Spirit will be an Advocate in that he will reveal the truth about Jesus and glorify him, and will guide his followers into all truth.

You may be familiar with the hymn by Margaret Old that goes to the tune of the *Skye Boat Song*:

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,
gentle as is the dove:
teach us the truth and help us believe,
show us the Saviour's love.

But truth is slippery and hard to pin down. Later in John's Gospel, it was Pontius Pilate who said: 'what is truth?' The postmodern worldview holds that all truth is relative, that truth is a matter of perspective and culture, and can change. Nietzsche, writing in the 19th Century, argued that truth is impossible—there can only be perspective and interpretation. Despite this, there are certain things that most people will hold as true. Generally, these would be in accordance with verifiable facts or reality – this is red, that is blue – although I know it is possible to argue that this too is a matter of perspective. Then there are those things that are generally accepted as true by a group of people – it is true that we should not murder people. Relative truth is easier to understand in areas which are more a matter of personal opinion – 'it is better to buy Fair Trade sugar' might be true for me but not for you as it depends on what our criteria for being 'better' are.

The increased acceptance that truth is relative can be seen in the tendency in society to lose sight of what we might consider to be the boundaries between truth, opinion and even falsehood. We think of such phrases as 'being economical with the truth', or 'fake news' – denying something simply because we don't happen to like it. It has also become somehow acceptable, in certain circumstances, to dispense with the truth to attain desired ends. However, I suspect that it was always thus and is just more open and obvious now.

In the Bible, truth is an attribute of God, something that is stable, sure, reliable because God's truth is based on who God is. Today's Gospel tells us that, as Advocate, the Holy Spirit will prove or expose the truth. And perhaps the most important truth, the most important attribute of God that can and needs to be exposed in the world, is the truth of God's love.

We see God's love in action through the Holy Spirit in many places. In miracles of mutual understanding between those who have been enemies. In the work of campaigns for environmental justice and social justice. In acts of compassion and generosity between neighbours. Such actions may not be perfect, but they give us a vision of how the world might be. The Holy Spirit is a gift given to us all in baptism, and it is by exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit that I mentioned at the beginning that we may all contribute to that vision of a better world characterised by God's love.

As Margaret Old said in the hymn:

Spirit of God:

teach us the truth and help us believe,

show us the Saviour's love.