

Today is the Feast of Pentecost: originally a Jewish feast that celebrated the day that God gave the people of Israel the Ten Commandments. And that took place fifty days after the Exodus.

Fifty days after God saves the Chosen people and they receive the law which defines them as a nation—which sets them up as a special people who will live their lives in accord with that law and therefore in a manner that will show to the world that they are in some sense are worthy of God’s love.

Pentecost was the very day the Apostles were commemorating in the Upper Room fifty days after the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead — it was therefore on the fiftieth day after the New Passover—the sacrifice of the Lamb of God and His life giving Resurrection—that God gave the Church the actual means by which the Church can live the law faithfully and fearlessly. He gave the Church the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Blessed Trinity, whose name is Love. The Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is the Link in Love between the Father and the Son is now given to us. We can observe the Law of Love now, because the Love of God lives within us.

He descended upon them in a miraculous confusion of wind, fire and speech, they were utterly transformed. And for as long as they lived, the Spirit would stay in the bloodstream. Every decision they made would be Spirit-shaped: the choice of seven deacons; the admission of Gentiles to the Church; the sending of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. And the influence of the Spirit was not confined to decision-making at executive level. It was felt at the ordinary level too, at what politicians love to call the “grassroots.” It was felt in the gifts that were Spirit, sent for the service of the Church, unusual gifts like healing or prophecy, designed to meet the needs of an infant Church, but ordinary gifts too, required to meet the needs of God’s children everywhere, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22).

It is by exercising these gifts that we honour the Spirit. When we curb our evil instincts, we honour him. When we respond to the better impulses, we let the Spirit work in us. The Holy Spirit is the rising sap moving all that is best in us. It is through and with our better instincts that the Spirit works.

The Holy Spirit is essentially the very life of God, and that life is a life of love. It is that divine life, that divine love, which was poured out at Pentecost, initially on the first disciples but through them on all who were open to receive this powerful and wonderful gift.

The spiritual is not something other-worldly; it is humanity at its best. On that first Pentecost, there was a wonderful communion between people from all over the Roman Empire. They were united in hearing in their own native language the preaching of the first disciples about the marvels of God. In spite of differences of language and culture there was a profound communion among them. Wherever we find such communion of heart and spirit today among those who are strikingly different, there the Holy Spirit is at work. Unity in diversity is the mark of the Spirit.

You realise of course that the promise of Pentecost is baptism. “The one coming after me,” the Baptist promised, “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

This Pentecostal promise speaks not of some infantile christening, the dribbling of water across the crown, water wiped away with delicate embroidered cloths. Nor does this promise speak of the lighting of a candle with safe flame, or the rubbing of an oily cross on the forehead.

Rather, this Pentecostal promise threatens full immersion. Full immersion, as in inundation, the element of water encases you in its tomb. You could drown, or perhaps burn, for the Holy Spirit entombs you in explosion, and conflagration. Flames of God’s power lap inexhaustibly skyward – with your soul as fuel.

Perhaps you received the Holy Spirit in some civilized ceremony, with droplets of water falling onto your head, and the polite sign of the cross pressed into your forehead. On that day, the church ladies smiled. They nodded to one another, and observed, “How sweet.” Neither they, nor you, realized the power transmitted by liquid drops of hydrogen and oxygen onto your head – the same elements which in the right circumstances can fire a rocket!

Perhaps the Pentecostals get it better than we do. They celebrate the Holy Spirit in a ritual of fiery baptism, dancing and shouting and speaking in tongues. They engage the atomic power of God’s Spirit, while we

Anglicans act like the Father has invited us to afternoon tea and crumpets. In the process, could it be that we deny the Holy Spirit?

We have received the Spirit of God can we find a way to unleash the power. You see I think we are actually afraid of love. We are afraid of its demands. We shy away from it and become fearful. We only have to look at how we respond to those closest to us – often with reserve and sometimes with anger.

And anyway, Anglicans don't want to get drunk on religion. It sounds highly suspect. Most of us spend our lives trying to be rational and reasonable, sensible and above all in control. That way we can talk about people in need, have meetings about people in need, without having to risk losing control by being with people in need.

“Come Holy Spirit and fill the lives of your faithful people.”

The lesson of Pentecost is that the Word of God will not be contained or diminished or reduced—but will go out—in every language and dialect and in every corner of the world until the end of time—because it is the word of Love, the Law of love—the gift of God Himself.

So often we create complications about faith and about God. It is we ourselves who turn God into a God to be feared, whereas the God revealed in Jesus Christ invites us to be welcomed into the inner life of God himself, to be friends of God and children of God, who live a life not of fear but of trust and love.

It is the Holy Spirit across the journey of time who guarantees our ability to enter into a familial relationship with God. It is the Holy Spirit which gives life to the Church, which is charged to bring the good news to people of all languages and backgrounds.

Sometimes the Dove but always the thunderous fire!

The message of Jesus is a universal one, not just in the sense that it has spread right around the world, but above all in that no one, no people is excluded from that message. No society is too sophisticated not to be able to understand the message of Jesus. No society is too sophisticated not to need the message of Jesus Christ.

The essence of that message is love. It is when we allow the Spirit to make us loving people that God will come and make his home in us. This is the message which Jesus gave his disciples already before he died. It is the message that we as Christian believers are called to bring to the realities of the world of our time.

The Church is above all a community! Community is not just for the few who are naturally gregarious. It is not for the just for the unfortunate who need support. We need something more than a vague good neighbourliness based on living next-door to each other without enmity or undue friction or even as happens today without even knowing our neighbours. We all need real community. We need a deep sense of solidarity and care and love for one another.

A worldview based only on human ambition inevitably leads to divisions and confusion. And that is exactly what our world offers: individualism, self-expression and self-sufficiency have become the driving force of human activity. This Feast of Pentecost must challenge all of us to overcome that strong tendency towards individualism which we so often find in our society.

We must also be aware of just how much that individualism can infect our understanding of the Christian faith. We reduce our faith to a sort of book Christianity, something which serves to inspire our lives and provide a comfortable, personal, armchair spirituality, making faith a sort of private comfort zone which does not require reaching out to others. The Church is not a spiritual supermarket where I can serve myself and top-up on ways to save my own soul without ever speaking to anyone else or thinking of the consequences of my actions.

The Spirit leads us into a new frame of reference, in the divine dimension of love, where slaves are made children, visions and dreams speak of a reality that does not conform to a dark world, bloodied by the violence. The Spirit creates the world anew, if we can but see it.

The “Creator Spirit” is the one who helps us steer the path of human progress in a new direction, within a framework respectful of God’s design for his creation, forcing us to transform our individualism and self-centred-

ness into a response of generosity, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that spirit of unity and the bond of love, Lord and giver of life.

“The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.”

— **T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets**

Acknowledgements

A Brankin

Diarmuid Martin

Further Notes

“To ignore, repress, or dismiss our feelings is to fail to listen to the stirrings of the Spirit within our emotional life. Jesus listened. In John's Gospel we are told that Jesus was moved with the deepest emotions (11:33)... The gospel portrait of the beloved Child of Abba is that of a man exquisitely attuned to His emotions and uninhibited in expressing them. The Son of Man did not scorn or reject feelings as fickle and unreliable. They were sensitive antennae to which He listened carefully and through which He perceived the will of His Father for congruent speech and action.”

— **Brennan Manning, Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging**

“The spirit of bondage works by fear for the slave fears the rod: but love cries, Abba, Father; it disposes us to go to God, and behave ourselves towards God as children; and it gives us clear evidence of our union to God as His children, and so casts out fear. So that it appears that the witness of the Spirit the apostle speaks of, is far from being any whisper, or immediate suggestion or revelation; but that gracious holy effect of the Spirit of God in the hearts of the saints, the disposition and temper of children, appearing in sweet childlike love to God, which casts out fear or a spirit of a slave.”

— **Jonathan Edwards, The Religious Affections** (C18th)

“Above all the studies in the world, study your own hearts; waste not a minute more of your precious time about frivolous & unsubstantial controversies. My dear flock, I have, according to the grace given me, laboured in the course of my ministry among you, to feed you with the heart strengthening bread of practical doctrine, and I do assure you, it is far better you should have the sweet and saving impressions of gospel truths, feelingly and powerfully conveyed to your hearts, than only to understand them by a bare ratiocination, or a dry syllogistical inference. Leave trifling studies to such as have time lying on their hands and know not how to employ it. Remember you are at the door of eternity, and have other work to do. Those hours you spend upon heart-work in your closets, are the golden spots of all your time and will have the sweetest influence up to your last hour.”

– **John Flavel** (C16th)

“[The Holy Spirit] is present as a whole to each and wholly present everywhere. He is portioned out impassably and participated in as a whole. He is like a sunbeam whose grace is present to the one who enjoys him as if he were present to such a one alone, and still he illuminates land and sea and is mixed with the air. Just so, indeed, the Spirit is present to each one who is fit to receive him, as if he were present to him alone, and still he sends out his grace that is complete and sufficient for all. The things that participate in him enjoy him to the extent that their nature allows, not to the extent that his power allows.”

– **Basil the Great**

Mahatma Gandhi

I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Keep your thoughts positive because your thoughts become your words. Keep your words positive because your words become your behaviours. Keep your behaviours positive because your behaviours become your habits.

Keep your habits positive because your habits become your values. Keep your values positive because your values become your destiny.