

Pentecost, Eucharist

Acts 1:1-21, 1 Corinthians 12:3-13 and John 20:19-23

Father Christopher

Pentecost was, relatively recently, celebrated in this country as one of the greatest feasts of the Christian year. In every village and town across the land there were great processions, all the children dressed in white, hence the alternative name of Whitsun. Now, it seems a sorry shadow of its former self in most places, though not here at St Mary Abbots, where I am delighted that we have resurrected the procession.

Because Pentecost is a really important feast, the third most important of the church year after Easter and Christmas. I think one reason it might have slipped a little is because many now think of the Holy Spirit as something like a metaphor for God acting in your life; whereas He, or She, is the third person of the Trinity through which life was created and is sustained; and the gift of the Spirit is a very real thing. Sure, hard to *see* in a concrete way, but no mere metaphor. If Emmanuel is 'God with us', Pentecost is 'God in us'.

I can also see how Pentecost slides into Easter for some, the last of the 50 days of which we mark today, as we extinguish the Paschal Candle at the end of this service. And while Luke gives us two different Pentecost stories – one in his gospel, and one in Acts, in John's gospel, we hear how Jesus breathed the Spirit on the disciples when He appeared to them for the second time on *Easter Day*, rather than 50 days later.

For John, the giving of the Spirit was very much tied up with the rest of Easter. Without the crucifixion, there could be no resurrection; no resurrection, no ascension; and without Jesus's return to His and our heavenly Father, no giving of the Spirit. So ultimately, the giving of the Spirit can only happen because of Jesus's death. And yet, in Pentecost we do mark something important and distinct, which we can't simply roll into the rest of the Easter story.

For the focus of the Pentecost story is not Jesus, not even perhaps the Holy Spirit, but the disciples. The Spirit cannot be seen on its own (though we have the dove, the wind, and flames as signs of Her). No, we only see the *effects* of the Spirit, hence perhaps the difficulty some people have in believing in the Spirit in quite the same way as the Father and the Son.

Something very interesting flows from this - from the fact that we only see the Spirit in His effects. And that is that the Spirit is given both to individuals and to people collectively.

In Acts we heard that '*divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*' So, this rather implies that they each individually received the Spirit. Yet at the same time, '*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.*' All are speaking together, and yet people from different nations hear in their own languages. And this is how the Spirit works in the church isn't it? Giving meaning to the lives of each of us *individually*, and at the same time to all of us *collectively*. Not for nothing is Pentecost seen as the Church's birthday.

Faith is a very personal thing: if we have a moment of great spiritual revelation, it's likely to feel like it's happened to us as an individual, and to be something others can't immediately understand; we might find God nearest to us in intimate moments of personal prayer or in

reading or meditating on scriptural passages in the silence of our hearts. And yet, those moments of revelation often also come in the midst of a crowd. We feel as though the Spirit has spoken to us through the power of the liturgy we're taking part in: God at work *around* us, if still speaking to us very *personally*. These are hard things to talk about, because if I speak about how I feel the Spirit's power in *my* life, that might not chime with you at all; and so, we tend *not* to share such stories, perhaps also for fear of ridicule. Also though, perhaps, to keep them special. After all, after receiving her message from Gabriel, we are told, aren't we, that '*Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.*'

As I start to think about the nature of my time here, as I prepare to leave later in the summer, I see these two themes very strongly. I always find individual conversations, as people go through the toughest or happiest points of their life the most rewarding part of ministry – often things people have really struggled to share with another previously. That is one of the truly great privileges of ministry. And yet, alongside that, when people's personal sense of prompting, calling, mission – call it what you will – engages with an aspect of our communal life as a church, whether through serving, leading prayers, helping with events, or something no-one else here has thought of before, there is a real sense of something bigger moving among us. I certainly got that sense in a very powerful way while working together in our homeless ministry and in our work with Afghan and Ukrainian refugees. And in these things – in our life together here, I am reminded of the tongues of fire resting on each of Jesus's followers: the Spirit at work in each one individually, but being seen in the speaking of the whole assembled company together.

That is a profound gift of the Spirit. And I think as well as the feeling we have within the church, we must not forget what a sign we are for the rest of the community here who may not come to our services: for those who join our school family, people who may come to work here for a short period and find stability in popping in to pray at the end of the day, and indeed to those refugees and homeless people who struggle to find a community in which they feel valued.

None of this is to encourage complacency. The work of the Spirit is frequently hard work. But in knowing that we do God's work *in* the power of His Spirit, we can afford to have confidence. To take pride in the Church even, and in each other. But also to trust. To trust that because the Holy Spirit is given not just to us individually, but to each other, and to all of us collectively, as the Church - which is the Body of Christ - we are in safe hands. We are in each other's hands and in the hands of God, always with the Holy Spirit to hold us; to strengthen us; and to guide us.

At ordination the bishop tells us to stir up daily the gift of God that is within us. That is not just for those of us who are ordained, but for all of us. And as we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit today, God in us, let us all make that commitment, to stir up the gift of God that is within each and every one of us.

Amen