

Homily: Pentecost Sunday, 31st May 2020

Last Tuesday I went for a walk – my first long walk since the lockdown began. I decided to take a stroll through some local woodlands and see how far I got. It was lovely to be outside again, to enjoy the fresh air, to enjoy the sights and sounds of God’s creation around me. As I walked, I thought of some of the words of Psalm 103(104), which speaks so poetically of God’s creation: “The trees of the Lord drink their fill” ... “there the birds build their nests” ... “rabbits hide in the rocks”. And it was evening, so I could think too of how the psalm describes the end of the day: “When You spread the darkness it is night and all the beasts of the forests creep forth.” Now, to be fair, it was only Mason’s Wood – I wasn’t expecting beasts of the Amazon rainforest to besiege me – but I did have a sense of so much life around me – the plants, the various animals and insects scurrying around in the undergrowth. As I walked, I was very conscious of the Holy Spirit at work in creation, and it was very beautiful. It strikes me how Scripture and Tradition use so many natural elements and images to describe the Holy Spirit, the person of God whom most of us find at least a little mysterious.

We hear of two such images in the account of Pentecost today: wind and fire. The Apostles, gathered for Pentecost, heard “what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the whole house”; then “something appeared to them that looked like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them.” I was listening to a reflection on Pentecost during the week, and the priest giving this talk made a simple but important point: the wind filled the whole house, but the flames rested on each one. The Holy Spirit fills the whole house – the Church – but He is also given individually, to each of us, as St Paul teaches in today’s second reading, for a particular purpose. Pentecost is a gift to the Church, and a gift to each of her members – but, however the Spirit is at work in our lives, it is never a gift for “me” alone – it is always a gift that we must share with others. As St Paul says, “there are all sorts of service to be done.”

Aside from wind and fire, the Bible speaks of water as an image of Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39); it speaks of anointing (Isaiah 61:1/Luke 4:18), therefore using the image of oil to describe the Spirit; and the Spirit appears in bodily form, like a dove, at the baptism of Jesus. In the Sequence we pray at Mass today, more natural images are used: the Holy Spirit is light: “Light immortal, light divine”; the Spirit is “pleasant coolness in the heat”. Some of these images describe not the Holy Spirit itself, but the working of the Spirit: “On our dryness pour Thy dew”; “Melt the frozen, warm the chill”.

In this image from the Sequence, we see something of both the power and the gentleness of the Holy Spirit: great power is required to melt and warm – but these are not sudden, brutal changes – they are slow, gradual. The Holy Spirit is powerfully at work in our lives, but never in a way that causes us harm. He calls us to change at a pace we can live with. And since one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is patience, we can be absolutely sure that He’s also very patient with us.

“Bend the stubborn heart and will; melt the frozen, warm the chill; guide the steps that go astray.” Something of the Holy Spirit’s work is summed up beautifully here: leading, guiding, gently correcting us; melting hearts that are frozen, closed in, unable or unwilling to forgive, hearts that have grown cold and hard – these are melted. And if faith, hope or love have grown cold in us, the Holy Spirit comes to warm the chill, to enable us to open up to God and to others.

When I was at the Cathedral we used to run some catechetical programmes called 'sacramental trails'. Focussing on one of the sacraments, we'd take groups around the church, looking at various things associated with that sacrament. For confirmation we'd visit a stained glass window showing the day of Pentecost; the Bishop's chair, the *cathedra*, which reminds us of our link with the Apostles; the place where the oil of Chrism, used in confirmation, is kept. At the end of the trail we would go to the main west doors and open them – a reminder that as Christians, we are called to take our faith out into the world, to take the Gospel, to take Christ, to others.

This is exactly what happens at Pentecost. The disciples go from the room where they are enclosed, and go out to preach the Gospel, to share the Good News. And the good news is this: Jesus, our Saviour, is risen. It's what we have been celebrating for the last 50 days. This is the day on which that news goes public. When the Lord rose from the dead, He appeared only to limited numbers of His disciples. The news of the resurrection remained largely hidden until Pentecost day. There was no public announcement, until this day, when the news is let out into the streets. The authorities had tried to silence Jesus by killing Him, but His Body could not be held by death; the risen Lord could not be retained by the tomb; and, as of today, the news of the resurrection cannot be hidden away. It is announced to the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it's by the Spirit's inspiration that we can receive this news with faith, and so find joy. So it's a fitting end to the Easter season, because the Lord crowns His death and resurrection with His final gift to us, and because the news of salvation, the message of Easter, is finally proclaimed to all.

Today is not just the last day of the Easter season, but also the last day of May, this month of devotion to Our Lady. As I mentioned last week, this day would normally be the feast of the Visitation, when Jesus, still in Mary's womb, visited Elizabeth and her unborn child, John the Baptist, and filled them with joy. We're told that John leapt with joy when Mary and her Son entered the house. Today we celebrate another visitation of the Lord: the Holy Spirit enters the house, and the apostles are filled with joy. The Holy Spirit fills the Church, and we are offered a share in His gifts. We too are called to joy this day. May Our Lady, who knew very well the working of the Holy Spirit at every stage of her life, pray for us today, that we may receive these gifts with faith.

As I walked on Tuesday evening, I went beyond Mason's Wood and went further and further, enjoying the outdoors. I saw a few people I knew from the parish, and it was good to catch up with them. And my walk turned into a mini pilgrimage, because in the end I found myself at Ladyewell, our beautiful local shrine to Our Lady. I walked around the grounds and said some prayers to Mary at the well before returning home. It ended up being a sort of pilgrimage of the Holy Spirit – noticing and appreciating His presence and work in creation; visiting Mary, who knew first-hand the power of the Holy Spirit to make Christ present in our world. Her 'yes' to God, to the working of the Holy Spirit, set in motion the salvation of our world. Today, we too are invited to say our 'yes', to welcome the Holy Spirit more fully into our lives, so that the news of Christ may be made more fully known; the joy of His resurrection may be more widely shared; His gift of salvation may be more fully at work in our lives.

Fr Andrew