



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

## Feast of Pentecost

5 June 2022

readings: [Acts 2.1-21](#), [Romans 8.14-17](#), [John 14.8-17, 25-27](#)

The two big events of this weekend – Her Majesty’s Platinum Jubilee celebrations and our celebration this morning of the birthday of the church are woven together in hearts and minds.

At the end of the wonderful service from St Paul’s Cathedral two words were thought by the commentators to sum up the occasion – uniting and renewal. There was much reflection on what it is to have a monarch. We are not united by a document setting out a constitution, or by a set of ideas, but by a person who has the symbolic capacity to draw people together and encourage us into the future.

What better way to describe the gift of the Holy Spirit – the one who unites us and renews us. But it went further than that: just as the Queen’s coronation in 1953 gave cause for many to buy TV sets for the first time and TV presented the Queen to the world, so on Saturday TV made it possible for the Queen to be both absent and present in spirit at her own service of thanksgiving. The Spirit is ‘the presence of Jesus in the absence of Jesus.’

Pentecost like the Jubilee was a global event. In a minor provincial city called Jerusalem in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire there are people from all over the known world. We must imagine them returning to their villages, cities and towns, Greek colonies and Roman settlements with remarkable stories of their visit. The Gospel has gone global.

The Platinum Jubilee weekend ends today, as does our 50-day-long celebration of Easter. At the end of Evensong tonight we will extinguish the paschal candle and the cycle within the church’s calendar in which we have celebrated the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus will be over once again.

And as we have done in recent weeks in this Eucharist we listen-in to the voice of Jesus saying farewell to his disciples at the Last Supper. The reading begins with a misunderstanding, one of the devices that St John’s Gospel uses to tease out what Jesus is saying. Here it’s Philip not understanding the relationship between Jesus and God the Father. Philip, and no doubt he speaks for many of Jesus’ listeners, does not grasp that Jesus reveals God the Father to the world. If you see Jesus, then you see God who is the Father.

We can get that, we think – God is revealed in Jesus and Jesus has such a close relationship with his Father that they can be seen as one. God the Father lives in Jesus and Jesus lives in his Father. But Jesus then goes further and introduces another relationship – this time with the Spirit of truth who is already living in the lives of Jesus’ disciples and making Jesus and his Father present to them. In the background, I can feel Philip desperate to push back with even more questions! But we’ll leave those questions as an introduction to next Sunday which is Trinity Sunday!

Meanwhile, to us, it might seem to have been relatively easy for members of the early church to feel the full effect of the Spirit in those heady days. They were caught up in the Spirit. But what

might it mean for us today? How do we access this experience of being immersed in the life of the Spirit?

William Temple, the archbishop of Canterbury who died in 1944, struggled with the same question and he said this:

It's no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it; I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it; I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like his. And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could live a life like his.

The purpose of God's work in our lives is to enable us to be more like Christ and God's way of doing this is to fill us with the Spirit.

Notice the word for the Spirit in St John's Gospel – it's the Greek word 'paraclete' and it means 'called to be alongside', 'pleading the cause for another' and that is why the translation we use on Sundays gives us the word 'advocate'. The Holy Spirit is the one who draws alongside us, a counsellor, a wise friend giving advice. But that is not the only possible translation. The word can also mean 'animator' or 'encourager' and older English bible versions have the word 'Comforter' to capture this. God the Spirit is 'the Comforter'.

You may remember that the word 'comforter' in old English means to strengthen, but we have lost some of its dynamic in the way that we speak today. The Bayeux Tapestry from the 11th century tells the story of the Norman conquest of Britain. At one point King Harold is shown on his horse with his spear, almost prodding the rear end of one of his soldier's horses, and the text below says: 'King Harold comforteth his troops'!

I am not for a moment saying that the Spirit's methods are coercive, but the Spirit's role is to animate the presence of the risen and ascended Jesus in our hearts, helping us to be open to what God says to us, and giving us courage. God doesn't wrap us up in cotton wool but expects us to be alive, full of God's Spirit, serving God's purpose in all the world, full of God's energy.

The old English word lives on in the Collect for Pentecost. It's the gift of God's 'holy comfort' that we receive.

'Holy comfort' indicates a direction to the Spirit's work, an impetus, a prodding, an encouraging of our response to the risen and ascended Jesus' presence our lives in a certain direction – that direction is towards a new understanding of love for this divided and fragmented world – a world in which God's Spirit is at work uniting and renewing.

Pentecost is about transformed lives. God did not replace his inadequate disciples who betrayed him at his crucifixion, who were fearful of the future and doubted the truth of his resurrection, and could not get their heads around the Ascension. God did not go out to find a group of people who had greater understanding, better social etiquette, or higher IQs. God did not trade up the quality of the raw material. God enters into fulfilling his purpose for the world in and through the human beings that he loves. God's ultimate project is about transforming the human heart through the forgiveness of sins, overcoming our fearfulness, helping us to be the people we truly are, and offering the possibility of a new relationship with him. On Pentecost this project goes global. And the Holy Spirit is God's agent for his purpose of global transformation.

Think back to those pilgrims in Jerusalem who were there to celebrate the first harvest festival of the year, the cereal harvest, the 'Feast of Weeks' or 'First Fruits', as it was known. Yet in the disturbance of the rushing wind that is a symbol of God at work in raising his people to new life; in the image of fire that is a symbol of God at work in mercy and judgement with all people; in the gift of hearing and making sense of a foreign language that is the symbol of God overcoming the divisions between nations – God's people were gathered and renewed in a new form.

They were expecting a routine celebration yet what the pilgrims to Jerusalem experienced was the end times bursting into the present as the Spirit was given to the apostles and all who responded to their witness. God's kingdom, long awaited in the future was brought into the here and now, and a new community was born. The new community was the harvest of the 'first fruits of the Spirit' that would explode into the world.

And the harvest was a different sort of people than the world had ever seen. A community of love shaped by God's Spirit, established in the truth of Jesus, a people of diversity witnessing to the world. It is the Spirit who guides the life of the church, who interprets the life of Jesus for us and ensures that the church is faithful to the truth of the Gospel, and the Spirit who picks us up from the floor if we are not!

The Spirit shapes us the church every moment of everyday. The Spirit was at the heart of the creation, hovering over the waters of chaos as God brought the universe into being. The same Spirit continues to create, re-creating us as the body of Christ each instant, animating the quality of life that we lead together, the processes we adopt, the space we give to each other in our difference, aligning us with God's purposes, enabling each one to make a distinctive contribution to the church and to the world.

Let us pray for the gift of God's Spirit – the one who gives us the gift of holy comfort and who draws us together in unity and renews our hearts. Amen.

***The Very Rev'd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby***