

## Sermon for Pentecost | 24 May 2026 | 10:45 Eucharist

Some of you may know the classic 1949 film 'The Third Man', even if only by virtue of its distinctive theme tune played on the zither; and apologies for those of you who know it, as it may end up becoming an earworm for the rest of the service.

Based on the novel by Graham Greene, and set in postwar Vienna, the plot tells of a writer who arrives in good faith, seeking his childhood friend, Harry Lime, who'd offered him a job. However, he is quickly told that this friend was recently killed in a road accident. It becomes apparent, though, that there is some ambiguity about the death, with different accounts being given, and that though originally it seemed two men had carried his body to the side of the road after the collision, another account said that a third person was seen helping. It later transpires that this third man is Lime himself, who has faked his own death in order to avoid apprehension for his criminal activities.

These involved stealing penicillin from military hospitals, diluting it, and then selling it on the black market, injuring or killing countless people as a result.

There is a famous scene on Vienna's giant ferris wheel in which the two now ex-friends meet, Lime cynically saying that he has no qualms about profiteering from the human misery he is causing. For him, his victims' lives are insignificant against the personal gains to be earned from the city's chaos and deprivation.

Filmed in black and white amidst the wartorn ruins of the city, with harsh lighting and all sorts of angular shots revealing frightened and anxious figures standing in dark corners, it creates a bleak and forbidding atmosphere in which friendship is betrayed and a dark underworld thrives.

Now I accept that this image may seem like an odd one with which to start on this feast of Pentecost but bear with me if you will. For today, I'm wanting to pursue a sort of compare and contrast exercise as we celebrate a very different sort of Third man or more strictly speaking Third person, the Holy Spirit.

Our Gospel for this morning comes from John in which we are given another dark scene involving figures hidden from the public gaze. The disciples are behind locked doors. Anxiety reigns amongst these cowed human beings. There has been a betrayal, and the one in whom they had hoped and trusted, him whom they had loved, has undergone a horrible death. And knowing what had happened to their Lord, they are understandably afraid that the same fate awaits them. However, reports are also circulating about a missing body, increasing levels of consternation.

Into the midst of this anxious scene, the risen Christ appears. He stands amongst them, free of all that would fetter him; the grave, the grave clothes; not even walls and locked doors restrict his movement. He comes amongst them as life and light itself, and says to them, 'Peace be with you'.

This is a profound sort of peace; not a peace that comes through the reinforcing of those locked doors. Neither is it a peace to reassure them that they will be insulated from the rough and tumble of life in the world. He shows them the wounds in his hands and side as if to say, 'look, the world has done its worst to me, but fear not, for I have overcome the world'. And so he repeats his words to them, 'Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, so I send you'. This is a peace deeply rooted in God's love for his world, and on this foundation, he breathes on them and says to them 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' This is John's Pentecost, this is John's Third Person of the Trinity, this, if you like, is John's Third Man.

It is, of course, unlike the description we find in Luke's Book of Acts. Following Jesus' Ascension ten days' earlier, today's first reading describes the Spirit as given through something like the rush of a violent wind and tongues of flame, followed by the outpouring of different languages, all serving to fill the house in which expectant disciples were gathered. By contrast, John's Gospel offers something quite different. Here, the disciples are in the clutches of fear; immobilised, trapped by it. And in contrast to Luke, where Jesus has departed from his disciples, here in John, it is Jesus' himself who gives the Spirit to them. He does so in a way that is far less exuberant and flamboyant, but nevertheless, it has its own drama and power. For this Spirit transforms fear into courageous faith.

Fear can be terribly crippling. For sure, there are times when it is right to be wary and naïve not to be, but if we're not careful, fear can be destructive. It is, to use a particular image, one of the most powerful weapons in the devil's armoury.

There is a story from India about a man who is condemned to spend the night in a cell. He is told by his captors that a deadly poisonous snake inhabits this same cell. But because it's dark when he is thrown into it, he can't see whether there is a snake there at all. And so the man spends the whole night in the one corner of this cell barely daring to breathe in case this snake is alerted and deals him a fatal bite. Then, as the first rays of morning light start to come through the windows of his cell, he begins to make out a curled shape in the opposite corner, and says to himself, 'ah yes, they aren't lying, there is a snake; I was right to stay alert all night'. But as the light intensifies, he sees that in fact what is coiled up is a piece of old rope and not a snake at all.

I think it's a powerful story because for us, there can be many harmless and useless old ropes in our lives but as either our anxiety or the anxiety of others works on them, they are converted into frightening snakes which hold us captive.

I recall a clergy colleague who, as part of his tradition, regularly heard people's confessions, and he said how he found himself almost always first asking himself, 'what anxiety, what fear, lies behind this confession, this particular guilt or shame or sin?'. And of wanting to know what the person thought was the root of their fear and anxiety. For fear can lie at the heart of much of our activity.

It plays itself out on a personal level, but we see it within communities, and in our national agenda, and it is often the key driving factor in triggering violent action in international relations. And, of course, to return to the film with which I began, it was a spirit of fear and anxiety that permeated the ruins of Vienna. It nurtured an atmosphere in which betrayal and corruption was rife, enabling the Third Man to thrive, devaluing human beings and enabling destruction and death to prevail.

By contrast, today we rejoice in a Pentecostal third man, for those first disciples knew what it was like to be truly frightened. But a death-defying Christ comes into their midst, giving them his

peace, breathing God's spirit on them. And locked doors are opened wide, an emboldened faith ventures forth, and light and life, healing and hope are brought into the world – thanks be to God.

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