

Pentecost – 24 May 2015

Ever since humankind was created, we have yearned to make sense of the world in which we live and our relationship with each other and the natural world and especially to understand how we all came to be created.

Scientists, theologians, writers and artists in particular have sought to find, explain, describe and draw the mystery of God and this relationship.

Next week is Trinity Sunday when we explore the three aspects, personalities or persons of God with whom the whole of the created world is in a mystical relationship and I don't want to pre-empt anything that Tom might say then but I do want this morning to explore just one aspect of God; the Holy Spirit.

Today is Pentecost (or Whit Sunday) when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit to those first disciples of Jesus and the immediate impact that it had upon them. But just what is the Holy Spirit?

There are many names and descriptions to be found in Scripture and elsewhere; the Comforter, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the One whom I am sending, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Ghost, a rushing wind, a Spirit hovering over the face of the waters, the breath of God, tongues or flames of fire, a dove, a sense of deep calm and peace.....

If we were each to pause now and think about the Holy Spirit I wonder what we each would call to mind or imagine. I suspect we would collectively come up with a range of responses and ideas that are as varied as we are; some of us might think of feelings, others of pictures, others of words.

There is a famous icon (a devotional picture which has been painted) produced by the Russian artist Andrei Rublev in the fifteenth century that depicts the three visitors to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre from the Book of Genesis where they give the news that Sarah, Abraham's wife is to finally bear a son. There is a copy of this icon in our prayer corner. It is often interpreted as depicting not just three visitors of angels but the three persons of God, the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit is said to be shown in the colours of blue to represent divinity and green for new life with a hand resting upon the table around which all three sit to symbolise the Spirit's touch upon the earth and all that is in it, with a mountain behind the figure to show that so often in the bible God is encountered on a mountain top, a place where heaven and earth can seem to touch. A place that might be called "thin" where God's spirit, the Holy Spirit might be more readily encountered; do look at this picture when you have a chance.

In the book called *The Shack* by Wm Paul Young, published in 2007, he describes an encounter with a character called Sarayu (a Sanskrit name for girls meaning air or wind or holy river) who gently removes the tears of a man desolate at the death of his small daughter.

"As she stepped back, he found himself involuntarily squinting in her direction, as if in doing so would allow his eyes to see her better. But strangely, he still had a difficult time focusing

on her; she seemed to almost shimmer in the light and her hair blew in all directions even though there was hardly a breeze. It was almost easier to see her out of the corner of his eye than it was to look at her directly.

She was dressed ina brightly coloured blouse with splashes of yellow and red and blue. But he knew all this more as an impression of her than from actually seeing her; as she seemed to phase in and out of his vision.”

There but not there, a gentle but persistent refiner of souls who can tug away at the overgrown areas of our hearts like a gardener removing the weeds which are the things which separate us from God.

The Spirit may be a gentle breeze or a rushing wind, like John Wesley you may feel your “heart strangely warmed” or a persistent nagging at the back of your mind about something, drawn to a particular person or activity.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God active in the world. The Holy Spirit moves through the pages of the Bible with God’s people wherever they go.

In the beginning of the Bible in Genesis when a “wind from God swept over the face of the (chaotic) waters” or God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of his creation; in Exodus a strong wind divides the waters of the red sea so that the Israelite nation can escape slavery in Egypt; in the gospel of Luke when Mary the mother of Jesus is visited by the Angel Gabriel to announce that she is to bear Jesus the son of God she is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her so that the child will be holy; and at the end of the gospel of Matthew Jesus promises to be with his disciples always “to the end of the age”.

And then we come to the book of Acts (our reading today) and the disciples together in a house in Jerusalem when a noise like the rush of a violent wind fills the entire house and a tongue of flame rests upon each of them; throughout history the Holy Spirit creates, calms, confronts and empowers God’s creation and especially God’s beloved children.

To seek the Holy Spirit and be willing to invite or allow its power to enter our hearts and lives is in itself an act of great courage for the “Spirit blows where it will”, it cannot be confined by our poor and inadequate understanding of how it might work within us and what we hope it might do for us.

I don’t for a moment imagine that those disciples waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit thought that they would be given the power and ability to stand up and address an international and critical audience in numerous languages about the power of God. They were, after all, simple men from Galilee, from “up country” without a classical education who had hidden themselves away in fear after the death of Jesus.

Week by week each Sunday we ask for the Holy Spirit to be present and active in each of our lives;

We pray in the power of the Spirit

We ask that by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine may be to us the body and blood of Christ

We ask to be sent out in the power of the Spirit

Are these just familiar words and phrases that wash over us or have lost their potency or do we really mean to invite the Holy Spirit to be present now amongst us and within us.

I prayed that I might speak “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and to do so is to invite the words that I say to be used in each of our hearts and minds as we listen. It is to unleash in each of us the uncontrollable but transformational power of the Spirit that will work we know not how.

At the end of this service we bless God for the power of the Spirit that can rest upon each of us and we are asked to dare to live our lives empowered by the Holy Spirit. It’s a risky business because we cannot know how the Spirit will come and what it will ask of us. Will it be a rushing wind, the still small voice, the heart strangely warmed, the feeling of peace or the bold call to a ministry we feel inadequate for. Whatever it is, if we mean these words as we say them, get ready, for the Spirit will make itself known in our lives and only God knows where it might lead.

Let us pray

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father
Ignite in us your holy fire
Strengthen your children with the gift of faith
Revive your Church with the breath of love
And renew the face of the earth
Through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen