

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral
Sunday 24 May 2015 at 11.00am
The Very Revd Dr Paul Shackerley
Dean of Brecon

Pentecost 2014 (Year A)
John 20. 19-23

The Church Needs her Perennial Pentecost

It is difficult to identify what the Spirit is doing in our personal lives, in the life of the Church or the world. Yet we use the term 'spirit' to describe good things in life. For example, we say 'there is a good spirit in the schools now there are new head teachers leading'. Or, 'doesn't that person have a gentle spirit?' We sometimes affirm 'there was a lovely 'atmosphere' in church this morning'. Or, 'prayers were very peaceful'. Sometimes, we may even say, there is a spirit in the words spoken'. We see young people with a lot of spirit and 'get up and go' enthusiasm. We use these terms to describe life and energy in our daily experiences. So even though we cannot pinpoint this spirit, we have some sense of it in life from time to time.

When the Church speaks of the Spirit, we speak of her being life-giving, yet also disturbing in order to help us grow. We also describe the Spirit as a gift. So, the Spirit that created, re-creates, and disturbs us, often goes unnoticed in ways that we cannot perceive. There are a number of images presented to us in the Bible to describe the Spirit. The dove descending. A breath, wind and fire. The Spirit penetrates human experiences from the beginning of creation when she brooded over chaos. As T.S. Elliot wrote (Easter Coker), 'A lifetime burning in every moment.'

In the Old Testament, Pentecost was the feast which occurred fifty days after the Passover, when the Israelites celebrated the exodus from slavery, but also marking the giving of God's gift of the law to Moses. In the New Testament, Pentecost marks the fifty days after Christ's resurrection and our exodus from sin and death. And so, today marks the gift of the Holy Spirit coming on the Church, fifty days after the resurrection, to empower the Church for mission.

Now, when we are given gifts we are expected to use them or display them for others to see. Sometimes, we receive quite unexpected gifts that surprise us, or even shock us. I

have three gifts that are on show in my house that would be worthless to others. They are fridge magnets. One says 'attitude: I don't need your attitude, I already have one'. Another says, 'If I can't eat chocolate in heaven then I'm not going.' The third reads; 'Life is too short to drink cheap wine'. In themselves, these are useless gifts. Nonetheless they are gifts. I display them so others may see when they visit, and they bring smiles and conversation, albeit in small measure. But, their quality and cost is immeasurable, because they are gifts given to me when I went through hard and dark times, to remind me of the laughter and love I once shared with others, at times that were life-giving. They reminded me that I wasn't alone.

God's spirit works powerfully in the hearts of human beings, made in his image and likeness. The 4th Century Early Church Father and Archbishop of Constantinople, St John Chrysostom, wrote that the Holy Spirit comes to us most significantly during prayer. Following the instruction of St John Chrysostom, Christians in the Orthodox Church were instructed to stand for prayer in worship from Easter Day until Pentecost, and returned to kneeling on the day of Pentecost as a symbol of their renewed commitment to prayer. So, Pentecost was a Feast Day of intensified prayer. From today until next Sunday, Holy Trinity Sunday, churches and homes were decorated with tree branches, grass and flowers.

The foundation of this beautiful Cathedral church is founded on the spiritual practices of the 6th Century monk, St Benedict. Prayer was at the heart of Benedictine communities. He set about creating communities of stability and order at a time when the Roman Empire was descending into anarchy. Perhaps his rule of prayer and service, as well as order and structure in community life, saved Christian Europe in the dark ages. Benedict's enterprise remains a model for mission today: intelligent religion marked not by easy successes or showy liturgy, but by the sustained spiritual commitment to pray and an ability to live with complexity.

In his book *A Staircase for Silence* Revd Alan Ecclestone offers clues as to how we might set about this. He says that only a radical deepening and broadening of our vision is equal to the task of bringing to birth and nourishing a spirituality that is strong, generous and inspiring enough that will help us to grow up as truly human beings in the immensely complicated world. The rule and discipline of prayer must provide a way of

living for each person, and must be a concern of all. The world may well have entered another dark age. The demands laid on our Christian life of prayer is needed during such time is just as great now as it was for Benedict., because our fragile communities and world stand on some the dangerous edge of fragility, whether than is in personal life, or in the world's life. Today, we rededicate our lives to cry out in prayer, with the world on our hearts, even if sometimes feel tiny, insignificant or powerless, and everything seems terrifyingly big.

We pray today that the Church may experience that perennial Pentecost, because we need it in changing times in the Church in Wales. Today I want us to especially pray that men and women will respond to God's call to them to be deacons and priests, so the Church is equipped with sacramental ministry in the future. Pray for an increase to vocations. At the ordination service here in the Cathedral on 27 June, the Bishop ordain seven candidates to ordained ministry, he will pray, 'send down your Holy Spirit, O Lord, on your servant, for the office and work of a priest in your Church'. We will pray daily for: John Anthony, Liz Bramley, Judy Day, Lloyd Evans, Dorothy Lewis, Adrian Morgan, Julie Wagstaff, and Linda Watson.

The Church needs vocations, both lay and ordained. It also need fire in her heart, words on her lips, and prophecy in her outlook. William Blake in his poem *Pentecost* captured the need for a perennial Pentecost very well:

Unless the eye catch fire,
The God will not be seen.
Unless the ear catch fire
The God will not be heard.
Unless the tongue catch fire
The God will not be named.
Unless the heart catch fire,
The God will not be loved.
Unless the mind catch fire,
The God will not be known.

William Blake (1757-1827) from Pentecost