

We used to call today 'Whitsunday,' meaning 'white Sunday.' In the early centuries of the Church, it was a particular day for baptisms. The newly baptised people put on white robes to symbolise their new life in Christ. We have now revived the Jewish name for this festival. It expresses continuity between God's ancient people and the Church. The 50th day after the Jewish Feast of the Passover is Pentecost, the feast of weeks and harvest festival. And on that same 50th day after Christ passed over from death to life, Christians celebrate how they first received the fruits and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It was like fire burning in their hearts, giving them the power to preach, teach, and live out the good news of Jesus, and as a community united in body, heart, and life.

In Acts 2, and our first reading, we read that 'they were all together in one place.' 'They,' we learn from the previous chapter, are the twelve apostles, certain women disciples, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. It is striking that Mary, who is not named again in Luke's Gospel after the birth stories of Jesus, reappears at the beginning of Acts, Luke's second book. In his Gospel, he shows that through the Holy Spirit's overshadowing of Mary, God's life became flesh in Jesus. On the Day of Pentecost, he writes of that same Spirit overshadowing Mary and the disciples so that Jesus might become flesh in each of them and all of them together. In the power of the Spirit, Christ now lives on earth through his disciples, his Church.

The fruit of the Spirit's descent upon the first Christians is an even deeper common life. Constantly together for teaching, prayer, and the breaking of bread, the followers of Jesus share their possessions so that the needs of all are met. The Tower of Babel legend of Genesis 11, which tells of God confusing and dividing sinful people by creating language barriers among them, is reversed. Divisions of language are overcome as the Church becomes the first fruits of a humanity brought together in Christ. Whereas God's word was once entrusted to one nation and people, from Pentecost onwards it was to be given to every nation and people. The important symbolic message in this passage is that in the power of the Spirit the gospel will be preached and will be understood in *every* language.

More than that, the Spirit-driven common life built by the earliest Church removed the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, social class, and gender, thus

subverting the values and hierarchies of the Roman Empire within which it lived. Although for much of history, the Church has not lived up to its foundational cause very well, Christianity was born as a disturbing and disruptive challenge to what much of the world considers normal, particularly the attraction of power, status, and wealth, along with the dualism that creates an 'us and them' mentality and lifestyle for so many people and societies today.

In contrast to this disruptive reality of the Spirit's coming, the traditional collect for Pentecost which we prayed earlier, sounds rather dull. Nothing there of wind, fire, and divinely inspired revolution. It simply says, God has taught the hearts of his faithful people by sending them the light of his Holy Spirit. But then it usefully asks that the Spirit will grant us a right judgement in all things. Judgement here means discernment, seeking and discovering God's will in all things, at all times, and in all circumstances.

Discernment is difficult, because we tend to be controlled by our instincts, most of which are conditioned by our upbringing or culture. That makes it easy to mistake some of our strong opinions, judgements, and prejudices as somehow akin to the will of God! The traditional Anglican tools for discernment are the threefold application of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Reason will always respect and seek guidance from the other two essentials of the faith and their ancient wisdom. But it will also embrace common sense, including the lessons learned through developing human experience and an updated sense of justice, so that we can see that many time and culture conditioned assumptions, norms, and practices no longer work, and can no longer be justified. We do need to draw upon the Spirit, the Spirit who has already been given to us, to enable us to make right and just judgements, so that it is God's life in Christ that we reveal and rejoice in rather than the conditioning of our ego or culture or a narrow version of our religion.

We come to today's Gospel where the Holy Spirit is described as the Advocate, also known as the Paraclete and the Comforter, who comes to our aid. 'Comforter' here is best understood in its original and literal sense of making us strong. It is the presence of God inspiring and moving our hearts, burning our consciences, driving us into action, enabling us to love, calling us to prayer and to speech and to silence. All through the New Testament we read of the Spirit giving strength and courage, or bringing knowledge and understanding, and

giving the power to people to speak the truth about God and to act as God wills.

The Church's common life, a life that reveals the quality of love and fellowship that is true to its calling, is a clear sign of the reconciling and compassionate love of Jesus. It shows the world that there is a better way for human life and society. Embracing this way is demanding and cannot be fulfilled by our own efforts alone. It can be only by the fruits of the Spirit's life within and among us. As we celebrate Pentecost, let us be open hearted enough to what the Spirit seeks to bring to us, that is, the life of Jesus Christ within ourselves, a gift, a grace, that will indeed help to turn the world as it is now upside down. May the Spirit make us the new creations that enable the life, teaching, and values of Jesus Christ to impact all that we think and do and say, and help us learn, like him, to seek and discover the will of God in all things, at all times, and in all circumstances.