

Pentecost

THE GIVER OF LIFE

The last question that is asked of those who wish to be baptised is: 'Do you believe in God's Holy Spirit who gives life to the people of God?' Being one of the People of God is to be given life by him. Everyone who is baptised receives the gift of God for their ministry as a member of the Body of Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, transforming, renewing, and inspiring the people of God. We see the dramatic effect that the gift of the Spirit brings about in the remarkable change in the apostles on the feast of Pentecost, when men who hid themselves behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities, threw off their fear, went out to speak to the people and openly defied the authorities.

The Holy Spirit is the action of God in the world and in the lives of his people. The Holy Spirit did not arrive on the scene after the resurrection; there has always been a Holy Spirit. When we talk about the Spirit, we are talking about one of the ways that God makes himself known to us. We experience God in three ways: first as the ground of all being; God is what has to exist in order that everything else can exist. Second, God is our friend and saviour, who teaches us, suffers for us and forgives us; third God is within us, the source of our gifts and talents, shaping our individuality and guiding our lives. God is ahead, beside, within. God has always been like this. His Holy Spirit has been active ever since creation began, long before that Day of Pentecost that we celebrate today. In the story of the dramatic events on that day in, we see the power of God at work,

transforming, renewing and inspiring the life of his people. To put it another way, the Holy Spirit seals, sanctifies, and sends those to whom he gives life.

The Holy Spirit is the One who seals. When something is sealed it is marked as authentic. It is the Spirit within us, said St Paul that enables us to cry, 'Abba, Father' – the authentic cry of faith. The Holy Spirit has been described as the 'go-between', the activity of God that connects our lives with the truth of God, enabling us to give meaning to our experiences. As Jesus said, the Spirit leads us into all truth. (John 16.13) We know this especially in the deep moments of life, in the joy of love, the wonder of the natural world, selfless acts of kindness, and also in suffering and sorrow. The Holy Spirit seals these experiences with the mark of God.

The Holy Spirit is the One who sanctifies. It is through the Holy Spirit that we grow in faith, and in holiness. The Spirit works within us to conform us to the likeness of Christ. As St Paul said, the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. 'We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's people as God himself wills; and in everything, as we know, he co-operates for good with those who love God and are called according to his purpose.' (Romans 8.27–29) It is the Holy Spirit that renews us and unites us to God. A powerful example of the way the Spirit unites is the way the Pentecostal gift overcame the division of languages that had existed since Babel (Genesis 11.1–9). As the apostles speak to the crowd, instead of confusion, everyone can hear the truth in their own language.

The Holy Spirit is the One who sends. The fearful disciples are sent out as apostles – those who are sent to proclaim the Good News. The personal transformation that brought about this change is described by St Luke in the story of Clopas and his companion who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus. After he left them they said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts on fire as he talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?’ And without a moment’s delay they set out and returned to Jerusalem, and shared what had happened to them. The Holy Spirit is the one who turns our lives around and sends us out as witnesses to the resurrection. As we affirm at the end of the Eucharist, the Spirit frees us to live and work to God’s praise and glory.

This divine gift, sealing, sanctifying, and sending, is not just for the few but for all the baptised. Indeed baptism is in Holy Spirit – you remember what John the Baptist said talking of Jesus? ‘I baptise you with water; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.’ (Mark 1.8) Everyone who has been baptised – everyone of us – has received the gift of the Spirit, which include wisdom, knowledge, faith, discernment, healing, helping, and administration! In some this gift is manifested in a dramatic way, but for most it is more inward and hidden. So often we ignore this, going on this course and that course, trying to deepen our spiritual life or hone our pastoral skills, forgetting that what we need is already within us. What we need to do is to recognise the gifts we’ve been given and work with them.

This came home to me when I was Vicar in my first parish. It was the time of the Toronto Blessing, and charismatic renewal was making an impact on the Church. I respected and slightly envied

those whose lives had been touched in this way, but somehow it didn't seem to be for me. On retreat at West Malling I prayed about this, and was led to what St Paul says about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians. As I read I saw my gifts described, and I heard in my heart: 'You have got all the gifts you need; get on and use them.' It was a moment of recognition, and it has stayed with me. And I draw strength from it still.

We have to us the gifts we have been given and enable them to grow. That, I think, is what Confirmation is really about. When we were confirmed hands were laid on us with prayer, and we might also have been anointed with holy oil, that we might be confirmed in the gift of the Spirit that we received in our baptism. Everyone has a ministry within the Body of Christ, and in baptism he gave us grace to perform it. Just as this gift is renewed in Confirmation, so it can be renewed at other times also through the ministry of anointing. Anointing is an outward sign of the seal of the Spirit, a sign of healing and strengthening for service in the world. The oil is the Oil of Chrism, blessed by the Bishop each year in Holy Week, and this offering this ministry of anointing is part of the celebration of Pentecost. As we are signed with the holy oil on the forehead and on the palm of each hand, God pours his love upon us, renews his gifts within us, and shares with us his risen life.

To him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen