

Worcester Cathedral
Pentecost Sunday 2023

'Send down thy Holy Spirit upon thy servant Stephen for the office and work of a deacon in thy Church.' The words prayed by the Archbishop of Wales 27 years ago when I was ordained deacon at St Asaph Cathedral. I remember the day well: the joy, the anxiety; friends and family; the cathedral full, and even one or two themes from the sermon. But the main memory I retain is the moment of ordination itself. I knelt and closed my eyes, and it was as the bishop was saying the prayer that it dawned on me that I didn't feel anything.

And I am not talking about some dramatic spiritual moment, the Holy Spirit descending, or my life changed for ever. No, the thing I didn't feel was the hands of the bishop on my head. One of the key essentials for ordination, rooted in scripture and tradition is the laying on of hands. And nothing. I took the initiative and opening my eyes I bobbed up, raising the crown of my head into the outstretched palms of the bishop, making sure that whatever was being channelled, prayed, intended, was given every opportunity to penetrate hair and gel. I wanted this to be right. I knew I needed to act.

The feast of Pentecost celebrates the Holy Spirit. Not as a feast of the doctrine of the third person of the Trinity, but the celebration of the event, the animation, the empowerment, and the sanctification the disciples received 50 days after the resurrection, and which we receive day by day in our life as disciples of the risen Lord.

It is a living celebration of the present and not just a commemoration of the past. Which is why, in our worship these past few weeks, and in the liturgies for the Holy Sacraments we pray fervently for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is curiously illusive to pin down with words and illustrations which adequately convey the Spirit's power, and yet at the same time, so completely essential to our faith and our response to God in every second of our lives as to be commonplace, fundamental, and ordinary. We speak of the Spirit with ease and yet with difficulty: the Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, Spirit of God, Spirit of the Lord, Spirit of the Risen Christ, Dove, Paraclete, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Wisdom, Counsel and Might. The intricacy of doctrinal teaching about the Holy Spirit prepares us well for our feeble attempts to comprehend the Holy Trinity next Sunday.

And in our desire to experience God through the Holy Spirit we pray for the Spirit: praying to the Father, 'send thy Holy Spirit', or praying to the Spirit directly, 'Come, Holy Spirit'. But today in our gospel we hear of Jesus appearing to the disciples on the evening of the Resurrection.

We need not trouble ourselves about John's presentation of the Spirit's arrival on Easter Sunday as opposed to the account we have in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Like yeast takes its time in dough, so the Holy Spirit comes to fruition – once the triumph of Christ is complete in the resurrection, the Ascension and the giving of the Holy Spirit occur in due time and the effect is the same: the once fearful, frightened (and no doubt confused disciples), are animated and granted power from on high. Filled with the Spirit they are comforted, strengthened, and consecrated as the Body of Christ, His Church, the new creation, the new Israel.

But hear the words of the risen Jesus as he commissions the Church, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'."

He does not say, 'here is the Holy Spirit', or 'have the Holy Spirit', there is no offering of a gift which is unwanted, no forceful donation, no tentative proffering of something which might be nice to have. There is, in his words, an invitation. Ok it is an invitation which is hard to say no to, but nevertheless a covenant, a bond between the Lord and his disciple. *Receive* the Holy Spirit. We are active participants.

When I was young I couldn't quite get my head around why my parents were so happy to watch me and my brother open our presents before they opened theirs. Or indeed why they seemed content to perhaps have no presents of their own but rather to watch as my brother and I tore into wrapping paper and pulling out the gift went off to play with whatever it was. As I grow older I now understand the two joys which my parents expressed: firstly of seeing us receive such pleasure from the acceptance of a gift, and secondly the knowledge that giving produces as much pleasure, if not more, as to receive.

In the offering and proffering of the gift of the Holy Spirit, our Lord extends to us the ultimate joy of participation in his life – his life, risen, ascended, glorified, becomes our life – full of grace and truth. It is this gift, this power of the Holy Spirit than enables us to become his Body and so the Church is born. And in the words, 'receive the Holy Spirit' Christ lays the foundation for how we say yes to that gift. He invites us to respond in heart, with soul, in body and mind, so that we will be full-filled. We receive and we receive with eagerness and the eyes of God are full of love.

What joy such a response brings to our Lord! What delight as we accept his freely-given grace! At baptism we are born again as God's children, at confirmation we have this assurance of his presence affirmed, and at every eucharist we feed ourselves, nourishing our souls, so that we leave the altar full to the brim with his risen life. 'Receive the Holy Spirit' – not simply taking it, not merely acknowledging it, not just feeling it; but living it.

Living sounds easy on paper, but we all know that life brings with it its cares and sorrows as much as its opportunities and excitement. The life of the Spirit – which we have said yes to and receive again and again – is also one which will bring us turmoil as well as gentleness. And this is why, at the end of our Eucharist this morning, we shall hear Christ's commission and, in a series of questions, we ask for the Spirit's power. Each question contains the invigorating and scary phrase, 'will you dare?'

Will you dare to walk into God's future? Will you dare to embrace each other? Will you dare to share your riches? Will you dare to carry the light of Christ into the world's dark places?

The Holy Spirit is with us: we feel the Spirit in love and joy and peace, and we know that the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. The truth is that our world is not as it should be, it is cruel and unjust, it is breaking and groaning. It is for this reason that God empowers us to soothe and to heal, to mend and repair, to bring light and hope. We cannot receive the Holy Spirit without then using such empowerment. Like children with a new gift we must embrace the Spirit, run away with the Spirit, wherever the Spirit will lead, and be the vessel through which Christ's redeeming work continues.

Today you are called to be sanctified. Challenged to light up a dark world, provoked by God to speak God's truth.

Will you accept that which Christ now offers you to change the world? Go on, I dare you.

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