

We were enjoying our lunch with a view out over the ocean. Suddenly there was a crash at the next table and a flurry of activity. The waiter had dropped a glass of wine, not just a spill. There was much wiping of the diner and her designer handbag, shards of glass retrieved from within. Apologies were profuse, and dismissed as unnecessary, then the fellow next to her said 'Don't worry, it's an act of God.'

Before I could stop myself, I said 'Please don't blame God for everything that happens'. There followed a brusque theological exchange, neither profound nor useful and we got on with our entrée.

Pentecost presents a natural entrée to the large question of how God works in the world. Often called the birthday of the church, it is that point where the wondrous and confusing divine Trinity makes yet another landing in the created order. And what a splash it is!

Of course, the Spirit is nothing new. The Spirit of Truth, the essence of God's very self, has been around since the dawn of time. It is the same breath that enlivens the first earth creature as the Creator breathes into his nostrils, that urges life back into the dry bones in Ezekiel. David discloses the Spirit within him that enables him to speak and that famous Christmas passage from Isaiah that prophesies:

*<sup>2</sup> The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him,  
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
The Spirit of counsel and might,  
The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.*

It is the same presence of God that stirs the womb of Mary, the same dove descending that breaks the air at the baptism of Our Lord.

If Easter Day is the climax of the Christ story, what follows is the dénouement as the followers who rejoice at his risen presence are coached into living again without him.

We have followed the disciples on their roller-coaster experience of devastation, loss, resurrection joy as they embrace the risen Christ. Jesus knows how painful loss can be and seeks to reassure them

Today's gospel returns to the farewell discourse when our Lord seeks to explain to his disciples that separation in his death is not the end. Perhaps they have come to understand this as they encounter him, again and again, in the appearances, the promises, the resurrected familiarity that offers great comfort and reassurance.

But now separation looms again as the Risen One must return to the Father. Yet again, the prospect of emptiness, requiring a more permanent adaptation to a different way of being and, especially, of being *with*.

No; there is nothing new in this Holy Spirit of God. So why all the fuss? Well, I think it marks a turning point in our understanding of how God works in the world.

At Ascension, Jesus calls his disciples to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Up to that point, the whole Godstory has been centred on the eastern end of the Mediterranean, on Canaan, Galilee with a climax around Jerusalem. But God, In Jesus, must become absent so he can be universally present. Previously, present and ministering in Capernaum meant he was invisible in Jerusalem and vice versa. Released from any notion of physical identity, God is instantly in all places at all times.

The Spirit, we affirm in our creed, proceeds from the Father and the Son. Pentecost defines the destination of that procession. It is gifted to all who will receive it, present as the Spirit God, the Cosmic Christ, the gift of universal presence. Hence the birthday of the church, the people of God are given new life. And that changes things.

Which causes me to wonder whether the Spirit of God acts independent of those in whom it lodges. Is it autonomously causative? Does the Spirit create a dreadful virus, a tsunami or cause a glass to shatter and spill its contents and fragments into a Gucci handbag?

We often imagine that the Spirit acts on its own, zooming around doing things, making things happen. But that is not the logic of what we hear. The Spirit is not offered as a fix-all, some disembodied magic-weaving force that does the work that needs to be done. The Spirit works [for want of a better word] when it takes its place *in us*. Send your Holy Spirit upon us, we pray. Breathe on me breath of God. Jesus says, Receive the Holy Spirit. We will make our home among them – familiar words of comfort, of confidence and encouragement. Especially where encouragement is needed.

The writer of John speaks of the Spirit of truth, and 'when that Spirit comes, he will guide you into all truth'. And unless we are very aware of what truth looks like, is like, we may not recognise it even if we trip over it. It requires of us an attentive ear tuned in to the will of God.

We read again Jesus' words to his disciples. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. And among his promises stands one that he will not leave them, nor us, orphaned, helpless. He will send the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate.

The Paraclete is 'the one called along beside' not to take our place, usurp either our autonomy or our responsibility. It is God's own self that will accompany us, not in the flesh, but in the Spirit of that flesh. We become the enspirited flesh,

the incarnate Spirit to take on the work to which we are called, to be Christ in this physical realm, to be 'the bearers of the Christ-presence in the world'.

And these are times when hearts are troubled. There is dire need of this presence of peace if our hearts are to be untroubled, if we are to be unafraid. People of truth are troubled by a lack of open trust and honest dialogue. People who love God are afraid for the future, of the planet, of where economic imperatives may lead us, afraid for the downtrodden and the most needy, of a return to violent conflict as a solution (though I am not sure what it is solving). And we each bear our own personal troubles.

We hear you Jesus, urging us to calm our troubled hearts, not to fear what lies ahead. Why should we not? And we know all too well our imperfection, our inadequacy. We need someone not only in our corner nor even at our elbow, but deeper still, within us in our heart, our mind and our very soul, becoming one with us as we seek oneness with that same Being of Truth.

This Spirit is ours, not for the asking, not for the taking, for it is already given. It becomes ours in the response that reflects its own virtue, its own truth. This Spirit is the gift of love, the most intimate gift of Godself to us to take up and become that bearer of divine love, truth and wisdom. And peace shall be, not as the world gives.

John reveals how the Word became flesh. Bishop Tom Wright reminds us how, sometimes, the church is so very good at turning that flesh back into a lot of words. Some good, some rather empty:

*words of wisdom and encouragement, yes, but what changes the world is flesh, words with skin on them, words that hug you and cry with you and play with you and love you and rebuke you and build houses with you and teach your children in school.\**

Pentecost urges us and enables us to put flesh back onto those words – our flesh.

So happy birthday! Here is the gift of this day – and every day. Let us, in all the common experiences of life, remember to inhale deeply and respond with passion to the critical needs of all creation in this time.

\* NT Wight The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit