

Pentecost Sunday 31st May

Collect: Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, ignite in us your holy fire; strengthen your children with the gift of faith, revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Acts 2.1–21: When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ¹³ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’ ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Gospel Reading John 20.19–23: When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

Reflection

In John's Gospel in the evening on Easter Day the disciples receive the Holy Spirit. The Gospel writer connecting this with the encounter with Jesus in the garden on Easter morning and so bringing to completion the breaking down of the barriers of alienation and exile from God 's goodness and love. All now alert to the breadth of God loves and how this love reconciles people and all creation.

The High Priest had in the sacred rite on the day of atonement made real the forgiveness of God but now the experience of the followers of Jesus was that their lives were to be God 's means of reconciliation and forgiveness and that the renewal of all creation was central to this.

In the Acts of the Apostles, written by the author of Luke's Gospel, we find this release of the spirit described in a different way. Its impact on the followers evident in their appearance as having overindulged and with the imagery of fire. The sacred Temple is not the confine of God's activity in the world, instead it will be in the lives of these men and women inspired by Jesus teaching and now filled with the same spirit that enabled him to relate so closely and intimately with God. And forgiving each other for sin becomes the human task by identification with Jesus' death as the way of bringing people back to God.

Redemption here not conveyed as the saving of human lives from sin but redemption as being for human participation in God's saving work, God's redemptive work that encompasses all creation. I think Christian witness can too often focus on salvation from sin rather than on our human participation in the redemptive work of bringing fulness of life to all.

At the present time we are unable to worship together in Churches but the challenge for us as always is to hold on to our role in this redemptive work, being the hands and feet of God wherever we are. At the same time, we look to find the holy in our daily living. For many this will be time in a garden, on a country walk, listening to music. Also important for Christians the reading and reflecting on the Bible, engaging in prayer and the participating in Communion. All ways in which holiness can be found but some of these we are currently less able to share in, particularly receiving Communion. This however is not unique to our present situation.

Today is the 81st Birthday of Terry Waite who from 1987 spent nearly 5 years as a hostage in Beirut, in self-confinement apart from the presence outside of his guards and in a dark underground cell. He had gone to Beirut to negotiate the release of others and ended up being taken a hostage himself. During his captivity he had no writing tools or books and would spend hours trying to memorise the thoughts that he was having. One day a postcard was delivered to him and on it a picture of the imprisoned preacher John Bunyan, the writer of Pilgrim 's Progress. Initially he feels envious because the preacher had a window to look out of but most of all he is hugely grateful for the message that is written on the card received from strangers: "You are not forgotten. We continue to pray for you and all who are detained."