

Sermon for 23rd May 2010
Holy Spirit
Pentecost (Acts 2.1-21 John 14.8-17)

Look at the dove in the window. The dove is an image often used to represent the Holy Spirit who descended like a dove on Jesus at his baptism. In the Middle Ages, when only the rich few could read, stained glass was used to remind ordinary people of the bible stories. Pictures, we still say, are worth a thousand words. Here's another bit of interesting trivia about the Church in the Middle Ages: holes were often punched in the roofs of churches to symbolize openness to God, and at Pentecost doves were released through the holes and then bundles of rose petals were dropped through the holes onto the people inside. Choirboys ran through the congregation making whooshing sounds to remind everyone of the rush of the Spirit. What a picture! I think the churchwardens would have something to say if I suggested we start drilling holes in the roof – but we have something to learn from the reckless enthusiasm of the Middle Ages, something about total reliance on God, something about the creative use of symbol to help us know God more deeply than reason alone allows, something about letting ourselves go and letting God shower us with grace like rose petals falling from the roof.

While you're looking at the window, here's a story as we celebrate Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit came: "A young man was apprenticed to a master artist who produced the most beautiful stained glass windows. The apprentice couldn't approach the master's genius so he borrowed his master's tools, thinking that was the answer. After several weeks, the young man said to his teacher, 'I'm not doing any better with your tools than I did with mine.' The teacher replied, 'So, it's not the tools of the master you need; it's the spirit of the master you need.'"

In our gospel today Jesus tells his bewildered disciples: "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these ... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." That was quite a night for the disciples. They were getting ready to celebrate Passover when Jesus shocked them by acting like a servant and washing their feet. Then he started talking about being betrayed and killed, and that his friends should love each other. What did he mean by saying they'd do greater works than he did? They had a pretty doubtful record so far. When Jesus had only left them for a short time to go up a mountain with Peter, James and John they tried healing a sick boy and failed miserably. When Jesus saw what had happened he was stunned by their lack of faith and understanding. How could Jesus now be so confident that these same disciples would be able to do even greater works than he had done?

There wasn't time to think, things happened so quickly. What Jesus predicted happened; he was betrayed, denied, abandoned by his friends and killed. Even after they'd seen him risen, here they were at Pentecost huddled together in a locked room for fear of their lives.

This sorry crowd encountered something extra-ordinary that morning. Something that sounded like a gale, and looked like flames that came and touched each of them. They felt power flood through them. Perhaps only then did they remember Jesus' promise - this was the Holy Spirit of God, the Helper who would enable them to do works even greater than Jesus had done. The Spirit of the master rested on the disciples; she filled them with the gifts they needed and propelled them outwards to do and say things that in their wildest dreams they could never have imagined doing or saying. They did do works greater than Jesus himself had done, because by the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus worked through those who believed in him to reach more people with his message of God's saving love.

And what about us? What goes through our mind when we hear that story of Pentecost; when we hear Jesus' words 'the one who believes in me will do what I have done and even greater things because the Father will send a Helper'? Do we believe those words; believe that the Spirit of God can transform us too, be our Helper, propel us out to tell other people what God has done for us? For most of us, I suspect, the answer is a guarded 'maybe'. Why is it that so many of us in the church are happy with Pentecost when it's used as a noun, but distinctly nervous when it's used as an adjective - Pentecostal? The dove is a comfortable image for the Holy Spirit because it's peaceful, gentle, non-threatening. It confirms our image of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, the Helper, the one who brings peace and solace. But what if Helper means helping us to do things we don't want to do? What if Comforter means bringing comfort when we are terrified at what God is asking us to be and do and say? What if Advocate is a pattern as well as a role - if we are not only to have the Holy Spirit plead our case before God, but we are also to be with people who need God and plead for them?

The Iona Community in Scotland use the wild goose as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, because this noisy, bothersome bird, like the Holy Spirit, jars us out of our complacency. It takes us further towards the experience of the disciples on the day of Pentecost. It takes us closer to believing that with that sort of power with us and in us then Jesus' confidence in us, the ones who believe in him, might be well-founded after all.

God's Spirit works in all God's people. Even in the disciples, that rag-tag bunch of no-hopers, the Spirit came and transformed them, as individuals and as a community of believers. The same Spirit is alive and working in the Church, and in you and me today, and she can and will transform us. For our part, we need only to be open to the power of the Spirit within us, to punch some holes in the roofs and walls we build around us to keep ourselves safe and comfortable, because through those holes, our specs of openness to God, God will come to be with us and in us, to enable us to do works greater even than Jesus himself did - perhaps not alone, but as part of a greater whole, as part of the Church of Christ open to his Spirit, bringing in his Kingdom, and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, spreading the message of God's saving love to the world around us. And as the Spirit of the master rests with us and in us, we might even feel God's grace raining down on us like showers of rose petals through the roof.

Let's pray: Come Holy Spirit, breathe on us, removing our doubts and fears about your power working in us. Breathe on us, giving us transforming power that speaks life in the midst of death. Breathe on us, so that the Gospel message of justice, peace and love is communicated through the Spirit of Pentecost: we pray in Jesus name. Amen!

Blessings,
Gill