

10.15 am HC

5 June 2022

Acts 2: 1-21; John 14: 8-17, 25-27

Pentecost and Platinum Jubilee

Two powerful Bible readings today: thank you James and Hester. Firstly, the mysterious, vivid, multi-sensory account of the day of Pentecost. Like the fans camped out along the Mall this weekend, expectation is high in Jerusalem: the faithful have been gathered for days, praying and waiting, for the festival day: to be there, to see it. And what happens is beyond all their expectations as the Holy Spirit fills each one, enabling them to speak in power, to communicate widely, to share and show the good news of Jesus. This explosion results in the Church – today is our birthday, in fact. How wonderful that it coincides with the Jubilee and our village celebrations this weekend and here, later today.

It was a very personal gospel reading, as John recounts Jesus' words to his friends shortly before he leaves them, explaining the relationships between God the Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus promises he will be with them, for ever, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus with them, with us. Through the gift of the Spirit we are, amazingly, drawn into the family of God and the mutual, creative and nurturing life of God.

The Holy Spirit is variously described here as the Helper, Counsellor, Advocate or Comforter – all translations of the Greek *parakletos*, which has the sense of the Spirit alongside, on our side, with us and for us. The variety of translations shows just how wide-ranging the Spirit's help

is, for all situations, all times and seasons, whatever we face or experience. And so it has proved – as we consider the history of Jesus' followers, from the first days of the apostles, to the lives of our local saints- Brandon, Bede, Aidan, Cuthbert, each one on fire with the Spirit, helped, guided, empowered to live out God's calling, to our day and all that we've seen and experienced of the Spirit's power, guidance and help, in our own lives. Yes, the Helper, Counsellor, Advocate and Comforter is powerfully active today, for Jesus promised to be us always.

Did you notice in today's collect that we ask God to help us, by the holy spirit, *to rejoice in his holy comfort?*

Last week, our collect said something similar:

*We beseech you leave us not comfortless,
but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us...*

These words *comfort* and *comforter* have been preserved and used since the Collects of Cranmer in the Book of Commons Prayer.

So I'd like to explore briefly this idea of the Holy Spirit as the one who brings COMFORT: the Comforter.

In my childhood, the word 'comforter' was still- almost- in common parlance as a word for a warm scarf, as worn by Dickens' characters as protection against the cold winds of poverty or the chill draughts of despair. Hand knitted with love, of course, in colours to bring cheer and hope. Maybe that's not such a bad image of the Holy Spirit after all?

In the Bible, **comfort** is a key attribute of God- God who is both just and merciful. Many of us will know the words of Isaiah which we read and sing in Advent:

Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received double from the Lord's hand for all her sins.

This is the prelude, in Isaiah chapter 40, to the announcement of the herald who will prepare the way for the Messiah, in a passage that ends with words of power and glory, but also comfort.

See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd:

he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

This comfort is evident too in Jesus, our good shepherd, as we see him again and again offering comfort, to a grieving widow, a desperate father, a hungry crowd, a dying criminal...

In all these instances, God's comfort lifts up the weary and broken, restores lost futures, brings Hope, the steadfast, certain Hope in God alone. He is, indeed, the God of all comfort, and in sending his wonderful Spirit he gives us the Comforter.

When our early King James version of the bible, and Cranmer's collects were written, the word **comfort** had a meaning which we have largely lost, but which is preserved in the Bayeux Tapestry and the panel which shows the King encouraging his soldiers into battle - by prodding them with the sharp end of his spear! The words in the panel say 'Kind Odo **comforteth** his men'.

The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, will prod and motivate us into action.

Over these past few days we've heard many references to the Queen's faith, her character and qualities. I heard one radio interview asking, 'What is it in her character which has enabled her to serve for 70 years with such dignity and selflessness?' And I wanted to shout at the radio, *that's the Holy Spirit!*

The Queen's daily prayer, her deep faith in Christ and openness to his power, are what have made the difference and enabled her to fulfil what she has been called to do.

Prince Charles spoke very personally about his mother in his speech at the party last night, and told us 'this is what gets her up in the morning – all of you'.

And *who* gets her up in the morning, to continue leading, encouraging, meeting and serving her people? The Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

Finally, I want to remind us that the Holy Spirit is not just part of an ancient story, or a story about royalty, distanced from us. The Holy Spirit is active today in our lives, helping, guiding, bringing hope, peace and joy. But God never forces himself upon us: whilst in one way this gift is given as our Christian birth right at baptism – in another way, we also need to open our minds and hearts daily to receive the Spirit, to take Jesus at his word:

I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate – or Comforter- to be with you for ever.

What better time than today, to ask God to make his presence more real in our lives. So I'd like to close with a few moments of quiet, and then to use the words of the hymn we sang just a few minutes ago, which speaks of the Spirit as Love divine, and Comforter, kindling the warmth and fire of God's love in our lives. As I read it slowly, you may like to echo the words as your own prayer.

First, lets keep silence. PAUSE

*Come down, O love divine,
seek thou this soul of mine,
and visit it, with
Thine own ardour glowing:
O comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.
AMEN.*