

## **The Power of the Spirit**

**Pentecost, 31/5/20**

**Margaret Joachim**

Reflection for Morning Prayer. Readings: Acts 2, 1-21 and John 20, 19-23.

We have two very different accounts of the arrival of the Holy Spirit today, though they do have one thing in common: the disciples were indoors. John's description says that they were afraid. That may well strike a chord with some people today, who are also indoors and afraid. In his recounting of Jesus's extended teaching at the Last Supper, John has twice mentioned his promise of the 'Advocate, the Holy Spirit' who will be sent by God to teach the disciples everything and to remind them of Jesus's words; who will be their guide, the Spirit of truth. Now, in that locked room, Jesus prays peace for the disciples and breathes the Holy Spirit into them. May he also breathe peace and comfort into the hearts of those who are afraid today.

The other account – the one Luke gives us early in his Acts of the Apostles – is far more dramatic, and is the one everyone probably remembers: the sound of a rushing, mighty wind and the appearance of tongues of fire. This is anything but peaceful and the disciples are driven outside by Spirit-fuelled energy, where they begin, famously, to speak in other languages, to the amazement of the crowd.

It does not matter that these two accounts are different. They do not contradict each other. The first takes place on the evening after the Resurrection; the second quite a while later, after the Ascension and after the disciples had chosen Matthias to join them as a replacement for Judas Iscariot. Over that period the disciples first receive the gift of peace, much needed after the bewildering, mind-numbing experiences of what we now call Holy Week, and the permission to forgive sins. Later, after many days of prayer and reflection, they receive the power of the Spirit and find themselves able to preach, to evangelise, to prophecy and to baptise.

No wonder Pentecost is called the 'birthday of the church'. For the first time, although Jesus had left them, the disciples have everything they need to take the gospel of Christ into the whole world and start to build worshipping Christian communities. Two thousand years later, when we are together in church, we share Christ's peace with each other and we pray 'Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory'. It's strange how quickly that rushing, noisy, refining, powerful fire was transformed into the image of a dove. Even the earliest illuminated manuscripts and stained glass usually show the Spirit descending as a dove, and traditional representations of the Trinity (wait for next week's thrilling instalment) depict God the Father and Jesus sitting side-by-side on thrones with the spirit-dove hovering above them. It's as if the tremendous energy that propelled the disciples into the streets has had to be tamed – it's too dangerous for every day. A Spirit of Peace is much safer, kinder, less challenging – somehow much more suitable 'in church'. What would happen, I wonder, if on a Sunday morning we shared the power of the Lord?

Having been to Sunday School a very long time ago, I learned the Pentecost story in the language of the King James Bible. Even now it is those words that instinctively come to mind when I think about it. So it was only a day or so ago that I noticed a difference that really made me think. In the King James version, the disciples started to speak in other languages 'as the Spirit gave them utterance'. In today's version, the Spirit 'gave them ability'. Ability is splendid! Ability is skill and knowledge and the power to use them, all fused into one.

Ability is what the Spirit gives each of us. If we'd read today's Epistle we'd have heard St Paul discussing the different gifts of the Spirit, all of which are given by God to be used for the common good. Because they all come from God they are all of equal merit. The person with a gift of healing can't lord it over the person with a talent for hospitality, and the mechanic, the child-minder and the professor, all exercising their abilities for the benefit of the community, are all equal in God's sight.

This powerful, refining, purifying Spirit is with us every day, teaching us, guiding us, reminding us of Jesus's example, giving us the impetus to use our abilities to the full, and giving us the peace in which to turn to God in prayer and worship. In these extraordinary times the Spirit may be hovering among us, wanting to teach us new things about our relationship with God and as a Christian community. My prayer for us all is that we can be open to its nudges, attentive to its guidance and courageous in our actions, not indoors and in fear, but out in the power of the Spirit, living and working to God's praise and glory.