

## Home Retreat 2022 June Pentecost Eve

Tomorrow is Pentecost or Whit Sunday, the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles, all huddled together in fear in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. It transformed them from being wretched fugitives into being courageous missionaries of the Good News. Traditionally there is a Vigil this evening, just like the Easter Vigil in the night of Holy Saturday, a reading of seven Old Testament readings and one New Testament reading. I don't wholly approve of the choice of the readings put forward – for one thing, there is not enough of the New Testament, when the fullness of the gift of the Spirit had been revealed – so I am going to recall to you my own favourite readings about the Spirit. For a retreat today you can't do better than consider these readings or perhaps store them up for your *lectio* in the course of the week of Pentecost. I will give biblical references at beginning and end of each reading, in case you would like to jot them down and read the passages yourself. I will talk about the passages, but will not read them out, assuming that you are sufficiently familiar with them, once they are recalled.

### 1. Genesis 2.4-9 The Creation of Adam

At the very beginning of the Bible (verse 2) the Spirit of God is hovering or sweeping over the waters, as though this all-powerful and omnipresent Spirit is considering what to create from the formlessness of the waters. Then God created Adam and put him in a garden of delights (for that is what 'Eden' means). The creation of Adam is finished when God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. This breath of divine life is the foundation of the dignity and respect owed to each human being – and woman too, for she is formed by God also, not from the earth but from Adam's rib, but equally shaped by God into her due form.

We don't believe that this is a historical story. It is far more important than that. It recounts not a single incident but the universal pattern of human genesis. This used sometimes to be put that at a certain stage of development of each human foetus or embryo God breathed in the soul. No, that is pure legend. The dignity and genetic potential of man and woman means that the couple passes on their own gift of divine life.

The Garden of Delights also is not a thing of the past from which we have fallen away. It is the state in which we should be, an ideal to which we strive, a condition of peace, confidence and innocence, signified by the nakedness of the couple - they have nothing to hide – and the peace in the animal kingdom. This all comes with the breath of God, breathed into the human being.

### 2. Isaiah 11.1-10; 42.1-9; 61.1-7

The Book of Isaiah has three parts, the first the prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem, the second stemming from an unnamed prophet speaking at the very end of the Babylonian Exile, the third expressing the joy of the exiles who have returned to Jerusalem. At the beginning of each part we have the promise of a figure, the Messiah or anointed of the Lord, who is to incarnate and bring to fulfilment the Spirit of the Lord.

The first prophecy is the best-known, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (seven is the perfect number, sharp and indivisible). These are the gifts given in Confirmation, gifts to which we aspire, which give the perfect peace and control of the Lord, which we see worked out in the stories of Jesus himself healing, comforting, forgiving.

The second prophecy, at the beginning of the second part of Isaiah, is the first of the four Servant Songs. 'I have put my spirit upon him', and then it goes on to meditate on the gentleness, obedience and sympathetic love of the Messiah which will lead Jesus to his redemptive death.

The third prophecy, typically of this part of the Book of Isaiah, moves on to centre on the Spirit soothing the broken-hearted and proclaiming good news to captives. In short, Isaiah presents the Spirit leading the whole movement of salvation.

### **3. Ezekiel 37.1-14 The Spirit comes to the Dead Bones**

The prophet Ezekiel is promising the exiles in Babylon that the Lord will restore them to Jerusalem and their inheritance. It is primarily a prophecy of the return, but it is also to be understood as a promise of the resurrection of the dead: 'you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves.' Ezekiel sees a valley full of desiccated bones, and as he prophesies they come together, with flesh, sinews, skin. Then he is told to prophesy once more to the Spirit and breathe upon them, and the Lord says, 'I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.' Directly it is a prophecy of the revival of Israel as a nation, but it is also a hint of the future rising of the dead in the Spirit. The dead rise again in the Spirit, but it is a bodily and fleshly resurrection.

Writing to the Corinthians Paul also insists that the resurrection of the dead is a bodily resurrection. He sees it as a transformation in the Spirit. What is weak will become powerful, what is contemptible will become glorious, what is corruptible will become incorruptible, what is animated by the soul will then be animated by the Spirit. What does this mean?

It means that somehow we will be taken up into God. Being enlivened by the Spirit of God we will take on those divine characteristics of power, incorruptibility and glory. Our own resurrection is modelled on that of Christ, for Paul writes, 'Just as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be brought to life', and it is through the Spirit that we so share in Christ's risen life.

### **4. John 14-16, Christ's last Discourse, the Paraclete**

In the Discourse after the Last Supper Jesus four times refers to the Paraclete whom he will send to support his disciples. The Paraclete whom the Father will send (for in different sayings the Paraclete is sent by both Father and Son) is an Advocate or lawyer, someone who will stand at the right side of the accused and plead his cause, someone who can be called upon to help. He is the Spirit of truth, who will guide the community into all truth, so reveal in each generation the profound meaning and application of the teachings of Jesus' sayings. Jesus warns that his disciples cannot at that moment grasp all the implications of his teaching, and we are aware of the continual deepening of the teaching of the Church as each generation expresses in its own terms the truths of Christianity and their implications.

So the Paraclete is at hand in the elaboration of the teachings on the humanity and divinity of Christ in the fourth and fifth centuries, using the philosophical ideas and terms current at the time, like 'person' and 'hypostasis', in the leadership of the Church on new formulations of the Body of Christ in the Church and in the Eucharist, in the guidance not only of dogma but also of solutions to the pastoral needs of new situations, like the legitimacy of war and of capital punishment, of new possibilities of medical intervention and of human relationships and human reproduction in a changing world.

### **5. Acts 2.1-13 The Coming of the Spirit at Pentecost**

Luke, the author of the gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, is acutely aware of the Spirit in the Church. In his own composition of the infancy narratives about Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist he loses no opportunity to show that the Spirit is at work in the preparations for the coming of Jesus and the alertness of the chosen poor to the movements of the Spirit. Zachariah and Mary are both filled with the Spirit when they proclaim their canticles, the *Benedictus* and the *Magnificat*. Mary is to be overshadowed by the Spirit in conceiving her Son, and in the Spirit Elizabeth cries out her blessing on Mary, as do Simeon and Anna in the Temple. The same prominence is given to the Spirit in the guidance of every movement of the developing Church in the Acts of the Apostles. The deliberations of the community and the letter of the Council of Jerusalem are guided by the Spirit. Paul's journeys are similarly guided, time after time, by interventions of the Spirit.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Luke's special scene of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The significance of this scene is brought out by its numerous biblical allusions. The rushing wind mirrors the divine wind sweeping over the waters in the act of creation. The descent of the Spirit in tongues of fire mirrors the descent of the spirit on the elders, the delegates and assistants of Moses, on Sinai during the desert wanderings. The unity of the understanding of the message in different languages is the contraposition to the ineffective disunity of languages at the Tower of Babel/Babble, the one showing the frustration of human efforts and the other showing the effectiveness of the Spirit of God in overcoming such division, and leading on to the spread of the message to all nations – not only the unpronounceable collection of nations there mentioned.

### **6. Romans 8.1-17 Life in the Spirit of God**

Romans 8 is the chapter of the Spirit; earlier in the letter the Spirit has been mentioned only three times, but here the Spirit holds all our attention. The heart of the matter of the Spirit in the Christian life is expressed in this passage: 'You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you... He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit dwelling in you.' There is here what has been called an 'eschatological tension': the Spirit is already dwelling in us, since we have already been adopted by God as his sons (women too are sons in this sense, for in Jewish law only males had the right of inheritance) and can call God 'Abba, Father', but the inheritance still has to be completely fulfilled. Paul expresses this in various ways: here 'dwells in' uses the verb derived from the word 'house' so that it evokes the dwelling of the Spirit as in a spacious and permanent home.

Elsewhere, arguing that the body should not be defiled by immoral sexual activity, Paul uses the image ‘your body is the temple of the holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6.19).

In the Old Testament God is said to have taken Israel to himself as his own nation, but here this notion is deepened and intensified by the legal concept of adoption as sons. Paul uses other metaphors, such as freedom from slavery, a transformative change, for slaves had no legal status; they were legally non-persons. However adoption gives an even higher rank, enabling the beneficiary to call God ‘Father’. This is why the precious Aramaic formula is retained even in a Greek writing. More intimate still, however, is the image of the Spirit dwelling in the Christian as in the Temple or as in a home.

### **7. 1 Corinthians 12 The Spirit at work in Corinth**

One of the most memorable passages in Paul’s letters is the description of the Spirit at work in the Corinthians community. It must be remembered that Paul begins the letter by castigating the Corinthians – with a dangerously caustic tone of sarcasm, which obviously upset them – for their divisions and squabbling. But when he has finished criticizing them for their behaviour at the Eucharist (which he says is no Eucharist because of their neglect of the poorer members of the community) he goes on to introduce and develop the metaphor of the body and its many parts. Each member of the community has a special part to play, ‘the manifestation of the Spirit for the general good’. All the members of the body, though many, are one body, just so with Christ. He mentions the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment, tongues and their interpretation. At a later stage he seems to try to establish a hierarchy, ‘first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then works of power, then gifts of healing, ways of helping, ways of guiding, various kinds of tongues’, but he abandons the attempt to rank them, though he does later encourage them to ‘Be eager for the greater gifts’. The important point which recurs throughout the passage is the unity of the body and the harmony of its activities. We all have our part to play in the functioning and the wellbeing of the Body which is the Church – and in the wider community too. Finally, in the following chapter 13, Paul bubbles over into the familiar ‘hymn’ or declamation about the greatest of all the gifts, love, and gives that wonderful sort of check-list of its properties and activities.

### **Conclusion**

I hope all this gives something both for prayer and for joy at the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.