

Pentecost B: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104.26 –36; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27

Open your heart to the Spirit of God

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

I love Pentecost! It is my favourite Christian celebration for all sorts of reasons – the colour and the energy, the time to reflect on the awesome gift of the Holy Spirit, the chance to remember that we are never, never alone in our human journey, even if it feels like it some times. In talking about this celebration we have so many words and concepts to describe the nature and work of the Holy Spirit. In our opening litany, which used a selection of verses from Scripture, we see the Spirit related to water, wind, earth and fire – the ancient elements of creation. The Holy Spirit is the promised advocate, who intercedes for us and works with us. The Holy Spirit is the giver of gifts – in Corinthians Paul lists the gifts as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues. The gifts of the Spirit are simply God enabling believers to do what He has called us to do. The Holy Spirit also makes it possible for us to manifest the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The Holy Spirit made it possible for a bunch of frightened fisher folk and Palestinian peasants to take the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the known earth. Nothing stopped them. Above all the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Love.

There is just so much to preach about on this day. It is like a preachers box of chocolate all sorts – each thing you could say about the Holy Spirit is rich and luscious and you want to say it all! But I want to speak briefly about one thing. I want to take us to one place. I want to open the door to considering just one idea. The heart. We can talk about the Holy Spirit until the cows come home but unless we understand the heart, our hearts, it remains an academic, intellectual concept.

Our western scientific way of understanding our world has reduced the heart to simply being a physical organ or perhaps the seat of the emotions. But ancient wisdom saw the heart as the core and centre of our personhood as well. According to Jewish tradition the heart is the throne of Gods glory, the place where the *shekinah*, the presence of God is most deeply found.

When Paul writes in the letter to the Romans that Gods love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us, he is talking about God's reality breaking through to the inmost chamber of our own being. When Paul talks about God searching the heart and therefore knowing the mind of the Spirit, he is talking about the Holy Spirit who lives in the heart, and intercedes for us. The Spirit works below the

level of our consciousness, permeating our whole being and manifesting in our words and actions.

When the heart is made open to God's presence and God's mystery in this way it becomes compassionate. It becomes merciful. St. Isaac of Nineveh who lived in the 7th century wrote: *A merciful heart is a heart that burns with love for the whole of creation, for humankind, for the birds, for the beast, or the demons; for every creature. When a person with such a heart as this thinks of the creatures or looks at them, his eyes are filled with tears. He never ceases to pray with tears – even for irrational animals, the enemies of truth, and those who do him evil – asking that they may be guarded and receive God's mercy.*

In other words having a heart opened to the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit is to be slowly transfigured, to allow the mercy and compassion of God to find a home in us. This mercy and compassion can then extend to others and all creation.

However there is a problem: one that Jesus was all too aware. It is the biblical condition we all suffer from in one way or another – hardness of heart. Remember how Jesus railed against the religious leaders who had hardness of heart, who had hearts of stone rather than a heart of flesh, a heart unwilling to make room for God's mystery and God's love? We can all have hearts that are closed and hard. Maybe we have been hurt, maybe we want to hang on to controlling our lives and don't really want to follow God's will, maybe we are addicted to power and resentment, maybe we don't really believe that God's love can be so transforming if we just let it in. Maybe deep down we are cynical and have lost hope. It is hard giving all that up.

Yet if we want the Holy Spirit to do the work of the Spirit in our lives it will mean surrendering. It will mean turning to God and opening our hearts, inviting the Holy Spirit to come and renew and revitalise us. It will mean listening with the ear of the heart to the murmurings, the promptings of the Spirit. To pray is to be present deliberately and humbly to whatever the Spirit is doing deep within us. To listen to the Spirit opening our minds to God's word.

We have used Taizé music in this celebration of Pentecost. Many of you will know that Brother Roger the founder of the Taizé community was murdered last year. I'd like to read you something he wrote:

Extensive knowledge is not important at the outset; in time that will be of great value. But it is through the heart, in the depths of themselves, that human beings begin to grasp the Mystery of Faith. Everything is not granted at once. An inner life is developed step by step. Today, more than in the past, we enter into the faith by going forward in stages. Right at the depth of the human condition, lies the longing for a presence, the silent desire for a communion. Let us never forget that this simple desire for God is already the beginning of faith.

May our hearts be hearts of flesh, open to Gods love. May the Holy Spirit come to us, move us and transform us. May we find the space to listen to the stirrings of the Spirit and may we bless others through the blessings of God. Amen.