

Pentecost – 2019

It is said that travel broadens the mind, and that is very true. Mark Twain took the idea further: "Travel" he wrote "is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of *men and things* cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." Very true! Chesterton however in typical fashion reminds us that 'Travel broadens the mind, but you must have the mind.' Amen!

Susan and I thoroughly enjoyed our travels in England and Scotland as we usually do. We began our holiday during the Federal Election campaign so our minds were rather filled with the issues of this nation. Our thinking, inevitably, was somewhat parochial so it was good to escape and see another perspective. It seems that in our social and political world today in the west there is a race to a parochialism despite, or perhaps because of, globalization. Increasingly folk today tend to move in small like-minded groups, no bad thing until they become echo chambers for their own concerns, interests or beliefs, at the exclusion or expense of others. Unfortunately we are increasingly seeing uncharitable views of *men and things!*

It is often said that the Holy Spirit is primarily a source of empowerment, certainly we can see that in Paul, he writes to Timothy that the Spirit is a source of power, love and self-discipline, Jesus says that the Spirit will bring power from on high. But we must be careful in considering what power means in this context. Given our first reading today, the famous account of the giving of the Spirit in Acts can we not say that the true role of the Spirit lies not in empowerment but rather in discernment? And is there not power in the wisdom of discernment? Were not the miracles of Jesus events by which eyes were opened, not just physically but metaphorically? Did not Jesus perform miracles to bring a spirit of discernment? Clearly all those folk we read of today from all other the 'known world' would have had a huge surprise when their eyes were metaphorically opened when suddenly they encountered 'the big picture!' They were amazed, astonished, perplexed even. Their rather limited parochial field of vision was suddenly expanded! All who led by the Spirit of God are children of God, says St Paul. These folk divided by language, culture and geography become brothers and sisters, impossible to ignore. This is the power of discernment.

But clearly we don't do this well, the disciples didn't do this well; Jesus reveals to them the nature of God and he is clearly frustrated by their lack of understanding. Revelation is the operative word. Jesus is taking his disciples beyond the limitations of human reason and this is when revelation begins, when human reason runs out. He does give them an 'out' though, if they struggle with his revelation: 'then believe me because of the works themselves.' The problem is that they/we don't want to go beyond what is comfortable, rational, our own rather narrow view that we can justify and

measure. CS Lewis saw Christian faith in these terms, as a way of discerning or illuminating the world around him; bringing the light of revelation. He wrote 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.' The problem is that we don't always like what we see.

Simeon Zahl, a theologian at Oxford University writes: *One of the most **reliable** ways in which the Spirit acts in our lives is through 'negative', cruciform [or cross-shaped] experiences: through suffering, the thwarting of our ego, and the uncomfortable disruption of usual patterns of relating to the world, to each other, and to God.* What we are being told here is that if something is uncomfortable, disruptive, if it dents our egos a little, be mindful, be discerning, the Spirit, may well be moving!

There are no doubt many, many things which the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church and the world at this time. But almost certainly one of Spirit's most powerful messages is one that we are struggling to hear and that is the call to care for God's creation, and especially this precious planet which is increasingly blighted by human greed, poor stewardship, and what many have termed a 'nature deficit disorder'. I read whilst I was away that it has been calculated that the average child in Britain spends less time outside buildings than prison inmates; I'm sure the same applies here. The less we engage with something the less we care.

St Francis of Assisi in his Canticle of the Sun calls various parts of creation brother and sister, for Francis the created order is family, it is impossible to ignore. We know this canticle best of course as Mister Bean's favourite hymn: All creatures of our God and King: Dear Mother earth who day by day unfoldest blessings on our way. We must understand the creation and our relationship with it in new ways for there to be any chance of healing the damage done. It is call for the spirit of discernment.

So the Spirit of Pentecost is a spirit which calls on us to have a different perspective on the world and those we share it with, human and otherwise! It is a spirit of discernment, a virtue lacking in today's world. A world in which we are told, as we have been this week, that our salvation lies in spending more, and therefore using even more energy and resources.

I find in today's Psalm fear and comfort in equal measure: When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground. The matter of our environment is the big picture issue of our time which is being obscured by narrow thinking. Let us pray for a spirit to renew the face of the earth, the Spirit of truth, it will be costly, cross shaped and sacrificial; but that is the nature of Christian discipleship and the Spirit's call. Amen.