

The shortest sermon I have ever heard was on the feast day of St Barnabas. The preacher got up and simply said:

“Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith”

(Sorry, but my sermon won't be that short today!)

(I was really 'wowed by that statement'. At a time when I was striving to deepen my own faith, these words had a real impact on me. I wondered what that might be, to be 'full of the Holy Spirit'.

As I read more about Barnabas, I learnt about someone who was a great encourager of others, seeing their potential, whatever their past failures. He was present at the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus and accompanied him and supported him on his first missionary journey. Barnabas sold all his land and shared the proceeds with others, putting all his trust in the Lord for his daily needs and dedicating his life to the spread of the Christianity.

Today is the feast of Pentecost, the seventh Sunday of Easter, also known as Whitsun, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit who was to be *instrumental* in the leadership of the early church and through time to the current day. The power of the Holy Spirit has guided Christians in their mission, stirred people to worship and to recognise and act on what God wants us to do in our lives. It is quite a thought that, without the advent of the Holy Spirit, we would not be sitting in this church today. There would be no churches or cathedrals.

I was in Southwark Cathedral the other day, observing the comings and goings of people. Some had come in for prayer, for a service or to seek a place of quiet, away from London's busy streets. For others it was part of their tourist route on their visit to London, and they might continue on to visit St Pauls, perhaps Westminster Abbey as well as galleries and museums.

I started to think about the difference between a museum and a church. A museum can be a fascinating record of ages past or an account of what inspired people and what they considered to be of value. A church, on the other hand, may contain much of historical interest, but essentially it is a place which is *alive* today and somewhere people can still come to grow and be nurtured. It is not just a record of something that has happened but is constantly moving us forward. And it is the power of the Holy Spirit that drives this forward.

However, as we celebrate Pentecost today, in contrast to Christmas and Easter, when ..... and ..... people, respectively worshiped at St Mary's, our congregation today is of an average size – about .....

People just don't get as enthusiastic about Pentecost as Christmas and Easter. But I think that's a mistake - Pentecost is rather under-rated.

If we look at what happened on that day and the impact the Holy Spirit has had on Christians throughout history and still does today, Pentecost is hugely significant.

The Biblical account as told by Luke in the book of Acts, which we have heard this morning, describes something quite extraordinary.

There was the sound of a mighty rushing wind and "divided tongues like fire" coming to rest on the apostles. As they were filled with the Holy Spirit they began to speak in other languages. Each person in attendance "heard their own language being spoken". (The gift of speaking in tongues refers to the Apostles' ability to speak in their native language while the people listening heard "them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God".) Those watching were amazed and perplexed at this spectacle, believing the Apostles to be under the influence of wine!

Peter addresses the crowd, declaring that this gift, which made some in the audience ridicule the disciples as drunks, was in fact the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel and others that God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh.

If we read on in Acts, we learn that around 3000 were baptised and added to their number on that day, devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, breaking bread and spending time in prayer. Many sold their possessions and goods and gave the proceeds to the poor.

Imagine if such a momentous event took place in Wimbledon today. The national press would have a field day, not to mention the Wimbledon Guardian.

In his farewell discourse, Jesus made his disciples the most astounding promise, that he would send them another Advocate, who would remain with them forever .... The Spirit of truth to abide in them... to teach and guide them.

**I think the Methodist minister, Samuel Chadwick (1860-1932) got it right when he said in his book 'The Way to Pentecost' (1932) :**

"I owe everything to the gift of Pentecost. For fifty days the facts of the Gospel were complete, but no conversions were recorded. Pentecost registered three thousand souls. It is by fire that a holy passion is kindled in the soul whereby we live the life of God. The soul's safety is in its heat. Truth without enthusiasm, morality without emotion, ritual without soul, make for a Church without power, destitute of the Fire of God, nothing else counts; possessing Fire, nothing else matters."

### **So what is our understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit?**

When we say the words of the Creed, and state that we *believe* in the Holy Spirit, what do we believe in? What is our understanding of the Holy Spirit?

Speaking to others it seems that the Holy Spirit can be the most difficult part of the Trinity to understand.

There are those, in some church traditions who relate to the Holy Spirit in a strange, obsessed or mystical way. They experience the Holy Spirit in an emotionally ecstatic moment perhaps coinciding with the swell of music in a service of worship.

Others Christians relate to the Holy Spirit the same way we relate perhaps to breathing. We are grateful it's there; and we know it's essential but don't think about it often. Breathing just happens.

These responses are quite contrasting.

### **The poet John Donne said**

"God hath divers ways into divers men. Into some he comes at noon, in the sunshine of prosperity; to some in the dark and heavy clouds of adversity. Some he affects with the music of the church; some, with some particular collect or prayer; some, with some passage of a sermon, which takes no hold of him that stands next to him. Watch the way of the Spirit of God into thee."

**So where is the Holy Spirit in our lives, that the poet speaks of?**

When we open our hearts to God, the Holy Spirit comes to be part of us, to live within us. It enables us to perceive what God wants by looking at the gifts he has given us. It may lead us to work, for example, with those in need, for the greater good, caring for our creation or *even* pursuing a ministry in the Church. The Holy Spirit is something which takes us beyond ourselves – perhaps even beyond what we think we can do.

Paul tells us “each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7).

When we look at all that goes on here at St Mary's – people supporting one another in all sorts of ways and our community stretching a hand out to others beyond our own church family – we witness first-hand the Holy Spirit at work.

We could even go a step further. Perhaps we could treat *all* area of our lives as if being led by the Holy Spirit and in the light of the Christian message? Now there's a thought.

I am going to leave you with a prayer ....

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations.

Through Christ Our Lord

**Amen**