

Pentecost 2019

Today we celebrate the coming of the Spirit. Of course, the Spirit has been coming into creation ever since 'the Spirit hovered over the waters' of chaos (Genesis 1:1). The evolving universe continues to be chaotic, as matter struggles to go beyond what it is to find expression in ever more complex, but ever more unified, beings. Our faith tells us that it is the Presence that we call God that energizes the whole process of an evolving universe. Thanks to Jesus we know that God is love, which means that God is not controlling the process (it remains chaotic) but rather is present as love holding everything in existence and drawing everything to give created existence to love by learning to be an expression of God in giving itself, allowing itself to let go and to become ever more an expression of love. This is all the work of the Spirit as matter becomes conscious, and then self-conscious. The process of evolution found a marvellous opening to love in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who knew God as Love.

Jesus showed us what we human beings are capable of when we are fully open to the gift of God's creating and sustaining presence. He showed us how to welcome the divine Spirit and how to open ourselves to let the Spirit act in and through us. In today's feast we do more. We share our belief that Jesus did more than show us, he gives us his Spirit. This is something new: 'On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified' (John 7:37-39). Pentecost celebrates Jesus' gift to us of his personal communion with God, his Spirit. It was this that Jesus gave all through his life. What we are celebrating is the divine communion that is the fullness of the Spirit that Jesus experienced when he was able to say from the cross: 'It is accomplished' (John 19:30).

Our faith assures us that Jesus is alive, enjoying the fullness of life in communion with God, and it is this that is the gift that is poured out upon the whole world. It is for us to yield to the gravity of this grace, for it is the energy that engenders peace and harmony for the whole wonderful universe.

We have a simple word for what is blocking this yielding. It is the word sin. The ancient myths found in Genesis have an extraordinary depth of wisdom. We must stop trivializing the truths expressed in them. We have to stop thinking that the texts are recording events. Adam and Eve symbolize every man and every woman. There never was a paradise. Paradise speaks of our profound sense that we should all be 'walking with God in the cool of the evening'. There never was a fall. We are not suffering because of what our first parents did. The myth tells us of sin. We are offered life. We are offered love. We are graced to respond by giving ourselves in love as we give expression to the divine within us. But – and we know this well – we are tempted to think we would be better off if we could control our destiny. Instead of waiting for the fruit from the tree, we give in to the temptation to reach up and snatch it for ourselves. Instead of waiting on grace, instead of yielding to love, we grasp for ourselves.

It is this sin that blocks the life offered us by God, the life we see in Jesus, the life he offers us through the gift of his Spirit. We

We must take a stand against the self-centredness that we experience. This demands constant vigilance. It also depends entirely on welcoming grace, for it is the gift of God's Spirit that alone can give us the energy to let go and love. John Donne (1572-1631) expresses this powerfully when he writes:

'Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but nook, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me' (Holy Sonnets v).

Jesus longed to 'cast fire on the earth'. Teilhard de Chardin wrote: 'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire'.

Today's feast assures us that God's Spirit as experienced now by the glorified Jesus is being poured out over the universe. Let us help each other to welcome the fire, trusting that through us the world will know Love. Don't listen to people who throw cold water over our aspirations by telling us that 'no one is indispensable'. Of course we are indispensable. Each of us has a unique capacity to love. If we don't live it it will never exist. We can respond to Jesus' final plea when he entrusted to his disciples: 'Love one another as I love you'. Let us commit ourselves to this noblest of tasks.