

Pentecost Communion. May 15th 2016 The Day when the Holy Spirit came in power. 50 days after Easter Day - the word means 50th. The HS is a huge topic. This morning I'm going to sketch in a little bit of OT background, then using the two passages we heard just now, explain something about the Holy Spirit himself, and finally try to give some practical tips on what we can and should be doing about this third member of the Holy Trinity. A sort of Plain Man's guide to the Holy Spirit. Not of course that there are any plain women here this morning – perish the thought! – or indeed on any morning – but nevertheless this is for all of us.

And as we are on the subject of gender – always a tricky one in these PC days - it is helpful to refer to the Spirit as He. The HS clearly behaves like a person: at different points in scripture he has insight, convicts people of sin, has knowledge, performs miracles. He also can be lied to, grieved, insulted, and so on. The problem is that spirit is a neuter noun in Eng (and in Greek) and we naturally refer to other types of spirit as “it”. Whisky springs to mind, even gin.. But the Holy Spirit is part of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God actually became a person in Jesus so as to show himself to us. He is a personal God who loves his creatures and the Holy Spirit came to take the place of Christ after his death. It seems only natural to refer to the spirit as He.

OT b'ground. The Holy Spirit was there right from the beginning. In Genesis 1.2, we read **and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters**. And he appears regularly through the OT, usually inspiring a particular individual on a particular occasion. For instance, we hear in the book of Judges about Samson: **“and behold a young lion roared against him; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion asunder as one tears a kid; and he had nothing in his hand. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.”** (14.6) Earlier in the same book, we hear how **the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon** shortly before one of his famous victories (6.34)

But these are isolated incidents in which the spirit entered an individual for a limited period of time. Then came Jesus, and we read that he received the HS when he was baptised by John the Baptist, and the spirit came down to him like a dove, and presumably stayed with him throughout his earthly life. Then came Pentecost. Let's look a little more closely at the passage in Acts just to note a few points. First the tongues - an extraordinary vision. What do they mean? At least two things: it's all about communication. Interestingly, both Greek and English use the same word for both the physical tongue and for language, and both these meanings are implied by the vision of the tongues on that day. Pentecost signified three huge (“game-changing”) developments in God's communication with his creation. First, the HS was to be available not just to individuals who had been specially picked out by God, as in the OT, but to all believers. Secondly the HS would be with believers not just for limited periods, but forever, as Jesus promised in the second reading. And thirdly, the good news about Jesus was for all the world (“all people” 17), and God would now be dealing, as it were, not just with the Jews, but with any individual of any nation who believed in him. This was an enormous change, and it took some of the Jews who became Christians a long time to get their heads round it. And the Jews who didn't, still haven't.

We're obsessed with communication. If you're not obsessed personally, then you'll have noticed that the rest of the world clearly is! I expect you've all seen couples dining together without speaking. There's total silence, just music piping through... Gone are the days apparently when a couple would go out for a meal together and gaze soulfully at each other across the soup, maybe holding hands. Perhaps a little tentative footsie under the table. Now they dig out their mobiles - if they're not already holding them - and prod away with fingers & thumbs. Goodness knows what they do with their feet! But the irony is that God is a communicator too! (After all, we're made in his image!) He loves to communicate. The whole of the OT is about God communicating with his people. I think it's easy to forget this, and what's more remarkable still is that he longs to communicate with us! All we need do is turn openly to him. In other words to listen as well as speak. So at Pentecost we see God communicating with his people, and showing them that a new stage in this communication was starting. And the tongues of fire? I take it that the fire signifies urgency, excitement, cleansing.

This was all part of God's ongoing PLAN. Jesus explained it. Not surprising, really, is it? Surely we can trust that God has it all worked out. It's good occasionally to step back from the details of the Bible story and try to catch a glimpse of the big picture. Jesus crucified around 30 AD. By end of 1st century (70 years later) all NT written and the faith had spread to all the main centres of population around the Med. Then in 380 (only 350 years after the crucifixion) it became the official faith of the Roman Empire, which meant largely in all the known civilised world at that time, spreading outwards from Italy and the Med. Up to Hadrian's Wall, to the Rhine and Danube, Spain in the West, the start of the Sahara to the South, and somewhere to the RHS of Turkey in the East.

But more than communication is involved. The spirit has many different aspects. The passage from St John's gospel describes one of them. (John 14.16 and 17). Our version describes Him as a Counsellor (spell it – not a town councillor!) That strange word *paraclete* is sometimes used as a translation, and that is what it means: "Counsellor" – someone who gives advice or counsel. Technically, the Greek word means someone who is called to help you in some way, and in the NT this is usually taken to mean someone who comforts, and another translation is "comforter". Another function of the spirit is described in vv 25-6, where Jesus says that the HS will "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." Presumably this was in part how the gospel writers remembered what Jesus had said and done when they wrote it down for our benefit.

What else does the Spirit do? First let me ask you a question: What do we need most in life? HELP of one kind or another. Someone to love us and value us. Guidance in big decisions, eg marriage, job. Emotional support, patience (with people, pain, illness...). You know and I know that God offers all this through the HS. Yet we don't ask. WHY don't we ask? because Satan persuades us that we can cope on our own. We can't! Or because we don't believe God can help. Two sides of the same coin? Both involve faith of a sort – but both are negative types of faith. We need to cultivate the positive type which believes that God CAN help, and he knows that we can't go it alone, even if we're loath to admit it. Experience will soon show us the truth of both these propositions: that he will help us, if we let him.

And the HS will come to us in whatever form we most need him. Jesus said several times: **Ask, and you will receive.** God is waiting to help us. It's hardly a request God is likely to refuse. In fact Paul lists nine gifts of the spirit in I Cor 12.7-11.

I want to look briefly at just two of these. First the word of **wisdom**. I think this is something we all would like a little more of – or even a lot! Remember the verse that comes several times in Proverbs: **the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom**. So this isn't necessarily the ability to be better at Maths, or some particular skill you find difficult. It includes understanding scripture more deeply, and being able to explain it. Delving deeper into our faith, understanding its implications, and because of that being able to apply it to our lives, interpreting events, choosing the wise course of action, giving the right advice to others, and so on. Whenever I lead a bible study I always pray for wisdom, and it's wonderful how God answers that prayer. James reminds us (1.5) **If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him.**

Secondly the gift of **prophecy**. I think this overlaps with wisdom, and interestingly, this is the gift that Paul tells us to ask for especially. Now we'd all like to know the future, or at least we think we would, though I have my doubts about the possibility of knowing what is going to happen all the time. I'm not talking here about knowing which horse will win the Grand National, attractive though that might be, but rather the ability to read the trends of current events, to be able to use your faith and your knowledge of people and affairs to tap through prayer into God's guidance, in order to make wise decisions about your future and the future of others. Hard to express that in a few words, but that seems to be what Paul means by prophecy. Sometimes you just know, don't you, when someone's words have the ring of truth. I believe that these gifts, plus the other seven, are available for all of us. Obviously different people will excel in different areas, but there seems no reason why we should not all strive to possess and use these gifts, remembering that Paul stresses that they are given for the common good (1 Cor. 12.7).

We all want to improve our lives in various ways, and somehow escape the sometimes tedious routine of everyday life. The media are full of solutions, aren't they – from anti-ageing cream to self-improvement manuals of all types. I know I've felt this sort of yearning myself – maybe during those far-off years of middle age when struggling with teenage children. But the answer was there all the time. God has provided this "miracle cure" – not really the best name! although it is a miracle - in his Holy Spirit, who was always available to fill my heart whenever I let God send him in. The results of asking him in are not necessarily spectacular. Jesus did spectacular things, and they still happen. And he promised that we would do the same. But the steady transformation of a person's life is supernatural, even if it happens slowly, little by little. It's a spiritual process. Unseen, unpredictable. Because you never quite know what the spirit is going to do next. Remember Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night? (John 3) Why did Jesus compare HS to a wind? Because 1. He is powerful, 2. you can't see him, but you can see his effects, remember the great storm of 1987? I stayed in bed, and was disappointed later! and 3. He is unpredictable. God in the end will send the HS wherever and whenever he wants. Tho' I'm pretty sure that great

movements of the HS are usually preceded by prayer if we look hard enough (e.g. the disciples were praying a lot before Pentecost happened). Some of you will remember that spiritual classic *The Cross and the Switchblade*, which came out in the early 60s. Written by David Wilkerson, who did so much miraculous work among the drug gangs of New York. But how did it start? He was in the habit of watching TV for an hour or two every night to unwind, but began to pray instead. It was not long after that that things began to happen. Slowly at first, but soon with spectacular results, in lives which had seemed lost in the vicious downward spiral of drug abuse and violence.

I've always liked that verse in John (7.37-9) where Jesus says **"If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'"** and John adds **Now this he said about the Spirit.** (John 14.16 and 17) But here, to close, is a quotation from something I read the other day: "Every time I stand on the beach I scoop up as much water as I can hold in my hands and I think, "This is how much of God's presence, power and peace I have experienced so far." Then I look out at the sea. The difference between the water I can hold in my hands and the contents of the Mediterranean Sea (and then the Atlantic Ocean) is beyond my ability to comprehend. That's how much more there is to explore of God; that's how much more he has for you. You just need to ask."

Prayer: Lord God, we are overawed by the extent of your greatness, your grace, and your love for us. We pray that you will fill each one of us to overflowing with your Holy Spirit so that we may become more like Jesus each day, and so honour you and be a blessing to each other. Amen