Congratulations on all the red!

I really wanted us to see the little Zoom windows with a red tinge, so that when we look at the screen as a whole we find that Pentecost has changed us: the Spirit has arrived online!

Now, if you had a chance you may already have collected three things from around your homes:

Something to do with FIRE

Something to do with WATER

Something to do with AIR

This is not compulsory, but if you’d like to have a go at this mini scavenger hunt, do head off now to search around.

While people are off looking (I expect most of them will be children, although I may be wrong) let’s take a closer look at today’s readings.

First, from Acts, the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the one who Jesus promised would arrive to be their Helper once he was gone. The disciples gathered during one of the three great Jewish festivals that all men were obliged to attend in Jerusalem: Pentecost, named after the 50 days since Passover. For the festival, farmers would bring the first ripened fruits of their fields, loaded on oxen with gilded and flower garlanded horns. These first fruits were offered to God in a ritual combining sacrifice with the reading of scripture. There was also a sense of expectation, at least in Jesus’s time. The people were waiting for deliverance; for the Messiah.

So, outside, the streets and Temple courtyards are full of people enjoying that mix of togetherness, spectacle and ritual that characterised the festival. Inside, Jesus’s closest followers waited. Jesus, the first fruits of the new Covenant, had been sacrificed, offered himself to God, risen and lived with them. And then he left them, promising that a helper would come: ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ So they waited, for the promised gift to come. And don’t we also wait? Perhaps in the hope that we will soon be able to get back to the normal; perhaps in deep fear that we won’t. For them, the promised gift arrived in a blaze of fire and rushing of air. It isn’t always like that of course. Do we recognize the Spirit in our own lives when it comes perhaps in a quieter way?

In Corinth the attributes of the Spirit are celebrated, so Paul tells us in his letter. So much so that a sort of hierarchy has developed. Some spiritual attributes seem more important than others, because those who possess them are the wealthier, more powerful people. They’re treating what the Spirit brings as possessions not gifts. Not understanding that they have to be shared. How do we share the gifts we have, and how do we view others who are different? Do we even recognise that they have something we lack?

And our Gospel reading finds us with Jesus at another of the three great festivals: Tabernacles, or Booths. Here the ritual involved spring water brought up from the pool of Siloam. ‘Living water’ was the name for it. Carried each day in a golden vessel, up to the Temple, where it was poured out as an oblation. Except on the last day, a day of symbolic thirst and prayer for rain. On that last day Jesus declared that he is the true source of living water. Not only that, but that those who follow him will receive that gift, and out of them will flow that same water of life: the Spirit. Not just one golden jug full, but in rivers. How will that gift, given also to us, flow out of us and be received by others?

Let’s have a look at some of the things we’ve found around the house:

Something to do with FIRE – what’s important about fire?

Something to do with WATER – what’s important about water?

Something to do with AIR – what’s important about air?

I’ve cheated a bit. My red stole has all three on it, fire, water and air. Well, I think so anyway! It has 12 shapes on, for the 12 disciples. Understandable, as it’s made to be worn today, Pentecost. When you look from a distance, those shapes look like drops of water. Come closer and they’re like the blue flames of a gas burner. Closer still, and perhaps you’re looking up at the air above with cloud curling in it: the breath, the Spirit of God.

In all our readings we find the Holy Spirit coming as a gift, freely given.

Like fire – it can warm us within, and burn away what’s dead inside. If we let it.

Like water – it can refresh us, bring new life. If we let it.

Like air – it breathes into us: God’s own breath. If we let it.

And, as we find in all three readings, this one gift, the Spirit, expressed in different ways, is worth nothing if we try to possess it. If we try to keep hold of it for our own ends. It’s given to us for us to pass on to others.

The disciples knew that instantly. One moment they’re cooped up inside waiting in uncertainty, fear and hope. The next they’re outside with the crowd, speaking to and being understood by people from all around the known world. Speaking about God’s deeds of power. Acting as rivers of living water.

What about us?

Our confinement has been – still is – very real. For some that has meant increased exhaustion as they juggle jobs with the work involved in looking after children at home. For others there has been loneliness, without the chance of a chat or cup of tea with others. Not to mention depression, anxiety or, for some, the danger of living with an abuser. The certainty that we’re all doing the right thing, however hard, is starting to give way to the question of how we come out of this.

We can’t do as the disciples did, and rush out onto the streets together. We have to accept that this period of confinement will continue. But reflecting on the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit, of the nature of the gift given, has helped me to look again at the people I do meet. I find that I want to hear their stories more than I did before, and they seem to want to hear mine. They might be the neighbours I call to in the street on a Thursday night while we’re clapping. Or the old school friend who got in touch from Australia, after she saw me lead on Facebook the other night. Or the young man at the Food Hub who returned with two friends and the thought that they might come to church once this is over.

God is at work already, all around us. I want to be open to the Spirit, that warming fire, refreshing water, breath of life…wherever it’s to be found. How is the living water reaching others through us at this time?

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