

THE ADDRESS

Address for the Parish of St David with St Michael and All Angels, Exeter

31 May 2020, The Feast of Pentecost by Nigel Guthrie

You send forth your Spirit and they are created;
and so you renew the face of the earth. (Psalm 104)

We have been entranced this week listening to the baby blue tits in our garden nest box. It is a lovely sound; a sound of new life, joyful but vulnerable. I won't go into what happened to last year's brood. We just hope they will all fledge successfully in the coming days.

Many of us have had more time than usual to experience and delight in the sight and sounds of the springtime and to witness that joyful renewal of the earth that promises new life and growth. That has been a great gift in the midst of a great deal of darkness, loneliness and tragedy.

Today we celebrate the coming of God's Holy Spirit to the Church which the early Christians experienced with such power and drama. There was the sound of a mighty wind and tongues that looked like fire rested on them. They were able to speak in many languages so that people from varied lands could understand each other.

But this was not a one-off appearance by the Holy Spirit. Indeed shortly before the risen Jesus appeared in a locked room and breathed on the disciples saying "receive the Holy Spirit". And before the crucifixion he had promised that they would receive the Holy Spirit.

The feast of Pentecost is not a celebration of a one off event, it is the celebration of the Spirit of God which pervades all life. Indeed in only the second verse of the bible we read that "a wind from God swept over the face of

the waters”, a phrase which can equally be translated as “the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.”

You’ll know if you have a drafty door or window in your house that the wind can find its way in anywhere, even the smallest crack. And the Spirit of God also finds her way into every corner of the creation, unless it is deliberately sealed off. So the Holy Spirit is continually bringing new understanding to human hearts and a greater sympathy for those who are different.

The different languages spoken and understood in that account of the Pentecost in Acts are highly symbolic. In Genesis chapter 11 the story of the Tower of Babel is thought to be a myth explaining why people spoke different languages.

But at a deeper level we may understand it as a pictorial symbol of the pride and vaulting ambition that leads people to usurp the place of God. That false pride leads to the exaltation of one race over another and the degradation of those different from ourselves. And this pride which leads us to look down on others has led also to the exploitation of the earth and its natural resources. The desire for power and profit causes a massive dislocation not only with human society but also with the animal and plant life of our world. It lies behind the murder of a black man by police in Minneapolis and the suppression of democracy protesters in Hong Kong. It leads to the disregarding of the needs of the poor almost everywhere.

We fail to see that God’s purpose is only fulfilled when all people and all things are treated with respect and reverence, when their beauty and is recognised; when their divine origin is celebrated. The Holy Spirit brings this recognition and we pray that her power may come to those who have most influence in today’s world. Because it is only by setting aside the false pride of race and nation and by working together that we can successfully address the ravages of disease, pollution and poverty.

In this time of pandemic nature has been whispering to us of the purpose and power with which God has endowed his creation. O that we should recognise it and praise him for it so that everyone can share in its riches.

I would like to finish with words of the 19th century priest and poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.