

Address by David James, 23 May 2021

I remember coming back home after our twins were born. It was early in the morning and I returned from the hospital leaving Ruth to rest and recover from it all. When I sat down a verse from John's Gospel came to my mind; and that's when the tears flowed. It comes just after where the reading stopped this morning.

Jesus, as you'll have gathered, is preparing his friends for the trauma they're about to go through when he is arrested, tried and crucified. He does this by using the picture of a birth.

'You will have pain, but your pain will be turned into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So, you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ' (Jn 16.20-22)

Today, Pentecost, Whit Sunday, is sometimes described as 'the birthday of the Church'. Today we remember the joy of new birth, the day when, having returned to their house in Jerusalem the disciples are filled with the Spirit, the one Jesus calls 'the Advocate', (paracletos) the Helper, the one who stands by you in court or, here perhaps, the one who will bring you to new birth - your spiritual midwife.

When our twins were baptised a few months later the theme of the readings was God the creator and the gospel reading was again from John. It comes from early on in the gospel and Jesus uses there the same imagery of birth. It's when Nicodemus first meets Jesus; he comes to him by night because he's afraid of being seen visiting him, being a member of the Jewish Council. And Jesus says to him 'No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

Nicodemus is understandably confused by this, because the Greek word for 'from above' can also mean 'again' and that's how he understands it. 'Can you go into your mother's womb again, for a second time?' he asks. Nicodemus needs to be 'born of the Spirit', Jesus tells him. He still can't understand, and who can blame him? But he will later, we assume, because by the time of Jesus' crucifixion he has become a follower. It is he who, according to John, provides the copious quantities of spices with which Jesus is buried.

It was a marvellous passage to have at a baptism, that ritual of being born anew into the life of Christ, rising up from the waters of death into a new world, a new creation, filled with the Holy Spirit.

For the disciples in today's reading from Acts their rebirth comes dramatically with tongues of fire and rushing wind. The earth quakes because what is being shattered is the old world; this is the moment of new birth, the moment when they enter into the

new creation opened up by Jesus' resurrection. That event happened, not by accident, on the first day of the week. It was the creation of a new world, a new way of seeing and belonging in this world and a taste of the world as it will be.

Do you know that rather cheesy song from what was at the time a very popular musical, *My Fair Lady*? One of the characters, Freddy, Aynsford-Hill has just met and fallen in love with Eliza Doolittle and he sings:

I have often walked down this street before, but the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before. All at once am I several storeys high, knowing I'm on the street where you live.

Such is the transforming power of love. In Jesus God shows that love for us which transforms us and the world around us. It's that transforming love, the gift of the Spirit, that we celebrate on Pentecost. It changes everything. Things begin to have meaning and purpose. We begin to see things in a new way, to see the world through God's eyes, because of the one who helps us, the one who's on our side, our Advocate, our Helper.

So today we celebrate that wonderful gift Jesus gives us of himself, no less. He is at our side through the gift of his Spirit, the One who will guide us into truth, about who we are and what the world is like but could become when transformed by his love and forgiveness.

Through the Spirit we are changed, and gradually through our lives we learn things that at first would have been impossible for us to understand, just like Nicodemus. They would, in Jesus' words, have been too much for us to bear. But gradually the Spirit leads us into a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. So led by the Spirit the Church gradually changes, adapts and sees the world and its role in it differently. Often too slowly for the liking of some, but the Church of today is not the same as the one I grew up in. It has struggled with marriage and divorce, the ordination of women and now with issues of sexuality and gender in the LLF course. These have been difficult and sometimes very divisive issues, but what in 1921 would have been altogether too much to cope with is now either accepted or part of our attempts to discern the Spirit and view things from God's perspective. 'Many people don't realise,' said the spiritual writer Simone Weil, 'that religion is a process of looking.' The Spirit helps us see ourselves and the world as God sees us. So, we see the horror and the evil and the sinfulness of things around us - and sometimes in us. We see injustice and lack of integrity in others and in ourselves, and to confront such things we need the Helper.

So today is a day of celebration of the birth of a new creation and the work of the Spirit in us, in the Church and also in the world - for, like the wind, the Spirit blows

where it will. Our calling is to live in the Spirit and change our world into the new creation that God is bringing about. In Christ we already have a foot in that new world and are offered its power to bring where we are and who we are to new birth, birth from above.

The gift of the Spirit is ours for the asking. When people receive it they are filled with joy and it's a joy that's permanent and powerful and transforming, enabling us to see the world anew.

'How do you talk about things that are not just out of the ordinary but that take you into a whole new world?' asks Bishop Tom Wright. 'One way of doing it is through music.'

As I began preparing this sermon I happened to hear a song by the English composer Gerald Finzi from a piece he called *Dies Natalis - Birthday*. It was a setting of a poem by Thomas Traherne, an Anglican priest who had lived for only 38 years and died in 1674. His poetry lay undiscovered for more than two hundred years and when it was finally published Finzi was one of those who set it to music. It is Traherne's vision of a world transfigured by God.

We'll end by listening to it now:

Wonder Thomas Traherne

How like an angel came I down!

How bright are all things here!

When first among his works I did appear O how their glory me did crown!

The world resembled his eternity,

In which my soul did walk;

And ev'ry thing that I did see

Did with me talk.

The skies in their magnificence,

The lively, lovely air;

Oh how divine, how soft, how sweet, how fair! The stars did entertain my sense,

And all the works of God, so bright and pure, So rich and great did seem,

As if they ever must endure

In my esteem.

A native health and innocence

Within my bones did grow,

And while my God did all his glories show, I felt a vigour in my sense

That was all spirit. I within did flow

With seas of life, like wine;

I nothing in the world did know
But 'twas divine.