

The Day of Pentecost 2016

Let me begin by saying what a great pleasure it is to be here with you once more.

This is an exciting moment, and not only in the lives of those who are about to be confirmed.

Those of you about to be confirmed will know that, in a few minutes time, when I preside over your confirmation, I shall do so with these words: "Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit."

Nowadays, when we use the word 'confirm', we tend to think of it as giving verification to an existing assumption; establishing the correctness of something already thought to be true - having a medical diagnosis confirmed, for example, or the result of a race confirmed by a photo finish that's too close to call.

But the word 'confirmation', which comes from the Latin *confirmare*, actually means something else: it means to *strengthen*: to take something which is already there, and make it stronger.

There is a famous picture in the Bayeux Tapestry of Bishop Odo comforting the troops (It is the from the same root). But Bishop Odo is comforting his troops, not with a gentle arm around their shoulder, but with a lance prodding their backs. He is strengthening them for the battle.

That's what God is engaged in today: strengthening the faith and discipleship of those who are being baptized and confirmed: strengthened, by the renewal of their baptismal vows for themselves.

The candidates for baptism and confirmation will be declaring publicly that they are disciples of Jesus Christ.

In a moment I will ask them "Do you turn to Christ?", and they will reply (I hope), "I turn to Christ." So they, and all of us who have been baptised and confirmed, are making promises in response to God's love for us in Jesus, and in return God seals the covenant, and in this service of confirmation that seal is the gift of the Holy Spirit on whom we call.

This is a wonderful gift from God: to be given the Holy Spirit in order that we might live a life that is quite literally Spirit-filled – filled with the gift of God's Holy Spirit. I want to spend just a little while exploring what this means using three vivid images of the Spirit which are given to us in the bible:

- as wind
- as fire
- as dove

The first time the Spirit of God is mentioned in the Bible, the Hebrew word used is the same as that used for 'breath', for 'air' – the stuff which is all around us and vital for our very existence. So when we hear the Spirit of God we can think of the Breath of God, a great force moving over the earth, blowing wherever it wills.

This is vividly portrayed in the book of the prophet Ezekiel where the prophet describes the Valley of Dry Bones. God breathes into the bodies of dry bones and they come to life.

And the same is true today.

When the Spirit breathes into us, we become somehow different from the way we were before. We come to life. We take our first faltering steps towards being the person God has made us to be.

There's a great energy about the movement of the Spirit, but there is also gentleness. Some of us here may have experienced the Holy Spirit like a powerful, rushing wind which instantly changes everything in its path. Others of us will recognise the Spirit moving in our lives more gently, like a soft breeze.

We can't see the Spirit, or know where it came from or where it is going, but we know when the Spirit has been present in our lives. We feel the effects of its presence and we know we are changed, because that work of the Spirit has given us a glimpse of all that God intends us to be.

My second image today is the Holy Spirit as fire.

In our reading today, from Acts 2, the disciples hear a sound like a great rushing wind - and then, the Holy Spirit came and tongues of flame are seen hovering over each person.

The fire of God's Spirit is like a light that shines in the darkest places of our life. Our hearts can become ablaze with the power of God's love when we are inspired with the Holy Spirit.

But we must always remember that the fire of God's Holy Spirit is a wild and powerful force with the capacity to penetrate deep into the substance of our lives, and the capacity to refine and shape us.

When that begins to happen there is no escaping it, and being inspired by the Holy Spirit is not something we should take lightly. We are engaged in important business here!

Each of us carries something of the light and the penetrating force of the Holy Spirit within us, and our task is to respond by getting stuck in and playing our part in the transformation of God's world.

The final image I want to explore with you is perhaps the most famous of all, and I think the one most relevant to a service which includes baptism: the image of the Spirit as a dove.

In the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, the bible tells us that the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove.

The image of the dove has very old and positive associations. Where the symbols of the Spirit as wind and fire are powerful ones, the symbol of the dove is an illustration of the covenant and the peace which exists between God and his people.

We should not allow ourselves to be misled by this gentler image, however. The dove, like any bird, can fly wherever it wants – and that can be risky sometimes.

I am an early-riser and I usually listen to 'Tweet of the Day' at one minute to six each morning.

[There is an omnibus edition at the weekend for later risers.]

Today's tweet of the day was the Nightingale. We know that a Nightingale sang in Berkeley Square in 1940 when Vera Lynn made her famous recording during the darkest days of 1940, but we also know that the Nightingale we might occasionally hear in a thicket has flown from Central Africa to be there.'

And I am struck by the resilience of the birds that fly across oceans and continents at different times of the year.

And less exotically I am struck by the adaptability of the pigeons that live around Lincoln Cathedral.

We have peregrine falcons to discourage them – but the wily Lincolnshire birds have realised that the falcon will only take them on the wing and so they have learned to walk everywhere.

Some of this applies to the journey of faith which you are committed to continue as disciples of Jesus. The Spirit of God will keep blowing through your life and change its direction and lead you on new paths. Your part in that is listen and to be open to where God the Holy Spirit is leading you.

Encounters with God the Holy Spirit are life-changing. We cannot know the Holy Spirit and expect to remain the same as we were. The Spirit changes us. And our calling as Christians is to live so that others who encounter us on their journey through life are changed by what they see in us.

So my call to those being baptized and confirmed and to all of us is to be in the world as people who are living

- lives filled with the Holy Spirit
- lives of service and commitment
- and lives of passion for the Gospel

All this so that others might see the spirit of God alive in this place, and living in you. Amen.