

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Come, Holy Spirit

The Christian belief is that God is wise, kind and relentlessly benevolent. God is the ultimate giver; truly the gift that keeps on giving. If you want a noun to describe God's being you might call God 'gift' - pure gift. It is also true to say that God is Spirit (John 4.24).

We celebrate that Spirit today, by recalling the first Pentecost, but as we do so we should recognise that Pentecost was not the first appearance of the Spirit. The point about the Holy Spirit is not its novelty, but its capacity to renew. 'Come Holy Spirit, renew the face of the earth' is an ancient and prayer (based on Psalm 104 verse 30). It reminds us that the Spirit that brooded over the waters at the dawn of time (Genesis 1.2) might be just the Spirit that we need to help us deal with the mess that we have made of this planet.

Come, Holy Spirit - sort out the plastic in the oceans.

Come, Holy Spirit - restore the balance of the seasons.

Come, Holy Spirit - put a halt to the melting of polar ice caps.

Come Holy Spirit - plug the hole in the ozone layer.

In the Old Testament we read that the Lord God took the prophet Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones and told him to command the bones to come together and reassemble themselves as skeletons, and to be covered with flesh and skin. But no amount of prophesying to the bodies could cause them to live. To do that the prophet had to summon the wind from the four corners of the earth so that it might become life-giving, life-sustaining, breath within the bodies. (Ezekiel 37 1-14)

Without the Spirit you can have what looks like life, or indeed the makings of life, but for true life, for full life, for fullness of life, you need the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is what makes life life. It's what makes life more than the body, more than clothing. The Holy Spirit is the aspect of what matters that we can't put our finger on but which we miss when it is not there. The Holy Spirit is the fellowship of a group of friends or the love in a family. The Holy Spirit is warmth in relationship – without it there is cold, calculation, contractual thinking and chronic mistrust. The Holy Spirit is what makes love love.

The Holy Spirit is also the motivation of those who don't really know why they are doing good things, those who are giving their time and energies and talents not for reward or personal gain but for the benefit of others. It is especially evident in the motivation and inspiration of people who seek reconciliation after conflict and peace after injustice. Maybe the Spirit might be at work in you in this way – in your peace-making, community-building efforts.

The Spirit might also be at work in you when your thoughts for others become prayers for them. Sometimes our prayers are not expressed in words but in 'sighs too deep for words' (Romans 12.26). And Paul tells us that this is the Spirit at work - not taking over our linguistic capacities, but working below the level of articulate thought. And in any case, whenever we pray, whenever we pray *authentically*, it is the Spirit within us that is operating. True prayer is participating in the conversational life of the Holy Trinity. It is in the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ that we pray to the Father.

The Holy Spirit is not an optional extra in the Christian faith. It is as much God as is the creator and as is Jesus Christ and, with them, the Spirit stands shoulder to shoulder. The Spirit is powerful, creative, renewing, refreshing and quite uncontrollable. It is the Holy Spirit that propels us towards the kingdom of God – that way of living which God intends for us, the way of living that conforms not to God's *law* – if by that we mean blind obedience to arbitrary rules, but a way of living that is in accord with God's *way* – the way of the beatitudes, the way of life that shows forth the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5.22-23)

If you are excited by the 'control' side of religion you will be interested in the law. There is a lot to be said for it. Law and order are fundamentally about justice because they defend the weak. Chaos and anarchy may sound cool but are no fun at all for those who don't have much power. But human societies cannot thrive by law alone. This was Jesus' message: law is good, but spirit is very good. You can have all the flesh on the body, but it doesn't live unless it breathes. It's good to be disciplined and regular in your breathing, but the air you breathe knows no such regularity. And so it is with the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the ultimate comforter - the one who gives support and strength and a plan for the future to those who have suffered harm. It is the Holy Spirit who gives life and renews life, who makes life itself and restores creation, who brings people together in communities and who reconciles them when trust is broken. Ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who gives us meaning, purpose and direction in life; that end which is also our journey: the hope of God's reign in our heart, God's reign in our

fellowships and communities and God's reign over the whole created order, our sorry world.

So come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy people, kindle in them the fire of thy love and renew the face of the earth. Amen.

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Acts 2. 1-11; John 14.15-end*