

Whitsunday Sermon, for S. Botolph's Cambridge

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Today is Whitsunday, a feast also known as Pentecost, a Greek word meaning *fiftieth*, as it is fifty days since we started this season of Easter. We can work out that Moses' being given the law on Mount Sinai, and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples at Whitsun, happened on the same day. It is useful to remind ourselves of this link. After all, this is the Spirit of Truth, who will teach us all things... but Cranmer sticks to the word Whitsun, and so shall I. I want to think with you this morning about who or what the Holy Spirit is. Those of us used to reciting the *Te Deum* are well used to the "Holy Ghost, the Comforter", but what does this mean for us? Though the Holy Spirit does bring comfort, so too is the Holy Spirit the challenger.

John 14 is a continuation of Jesus' farewell discourse to His disciples, and takes us back to Maundy Thursday, to the Last Supper in the upper room. Jesus has washed His disciples' feet, giving them the new commandment: "to love one another as I have loved you." Jesus has told them, "Let not your hearts be troubled," a phrase that is then repeated here. Jesus is about to depart from them, to die, but reassures His disciples that He is going to prepare a place for them, and that even once He seems to have left them physically, He will still be present among them, in and through the Spirit, and they can continue to pray and perform greater works in His Name.

This chapter of John's Gospel, therefore, brings comfort. We will never be comfortless or alone, as the Spirit will dwell in us for ever, and will unite us with both God and our neighbour. First, with God. The image of indwelling in the Trinity we are given illustrates how love and mutuality are the very essence of God. He cannot but desire to enfold us into His loving arms, and it is the Spirit that is our advocate, that reaches out to us and gives us a foretaste of the full union with God that we will enjoy in the New Creation. The Greek word translated as comforter, *paraklitos* means someone who reaches out to walk beside us, at our side. That is worth remembering in this time of isolation and loneliness, when worship has taken on a less public face than usual. So too does the Spirit increase our bond of unity with one another, as there is only one Spirit. Different gifts, different manifestations, but one Spirit sent upon the Church, in which we all share.

Whitsunday gives much reason to celebrate. That God is faithful to His promises, as today, He sends His spirit upon the Church to enfold us into the drama of the Trinity. That the Holy Ghost comes to stand alongside us, as our comforter, as a bond and pledge of unity.

There is, however, a big difference between being comforted and being made comfortable. The Spirit is the indwelling of love. Not a sentimental kind of love, though, but *agape*, a self-giving, sacrificial love, that calls us to service, challenges us, equips us for mission, pushes us to go beyond our comfort zone. The Spirit is like a fire, a flame, a breath, a wind - if He dwells in us, we cannot sit still in our comfortable pew, but we are set into motion.

The word *Mass* reminds us that we are commissioned and sent out. If the Spirit comes to bring comfort to us in our worship, it is then our task to channel that comfort, that love, and that consolation to the world. If the Spirit unites us with God the Father and the Son and makes us Heirs of all Creation, then we will want to breathe that Spirit into the world.

Breath is a taboo subject in our times. Covid-19 has illustrated how quickly infection can, by breath, be passed on. It's hard to sing *Breathe on me, breath of God*, without thinking of masks, PPE, and the 2-metre-distances that we are rightly ordered to keep. But the Holy Spirit can also

be spread, like a virus, only one that is life-giving, strengthening and affirming. A flame that is passed on, like the Olympic torch, from person to person, age to age. We are called to be the channels by which God's breath of healing, new life, and rebirth is channeled into our communities, once this pandemic is over.