

A paraclete to divide the Church?

By my calculation we are now about half way through the season of Eastertide, moving from remembering the transforming love revealed in the empty tomb to the celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit fifty days later, at Pentecost. In our readings from the Acts of the Apostles in our morning services we have been hearing of the impact that the gift of the Spirit had on those first disciples as they became apostles – messengers – of the truth revealed in Jesus. And so our thoughts move on to the gift of the Spirit to us as we get ever closer to the festival of Pentecost.

In the Holy Spirit we find that aspect of God that communicates directly with us:

- To see the Father we must look to creation and the moral values which direct us to shape creation in God's image.
- In the Son we find the creative power and loving nature of God fully revealed to humanity in Jesus of Nazareth – the Christ.
- But in the Spirit we are able to come directly alongside God and feel his presence with us – we are able to be at one with God.

The Spirit will lead each of us to God in different ways – reaching us where we are and, if we open our hearts, drawing us closer to his loving presence:

- For some this will be the emotional excitement of those first Apostles as they experienced the gift of the Spirit in that upper room
- for others it will be the blazing vision of Paul on the road to Damascus (a story we recalled last week);
- for yet others it will be in the still small voice by which Samuel heard God call;

Indeed we can say with some certainty that, when we will, God will meet us in whatever way we need – the means and ways by which we might encounter the Spirit are as varied as we are as individuals within God's creation.

For this reason, we should prepare to celebrate Pentecost with joy. For in this festival we remember that aspect of God by which he is revealed to each of us – and this is a revelation that is not mediated by the prophets or told in the pages of history, but a means by which we can seek God in the fabric of our own lives.

But there is also reason to approach this with some caution. We are given the incredible privilege of being able to draw alongside God in the pattern of our everyday lives. Alone this is the great human aspect of the Christian faith; but it leads to the problem of interpretation – a problem that can be seen today in our own Church of England. There are many people who approach some of the issues that society brings before us and, in all honesty, claiming that they are guided by the Holy Spirit they reach differing conclusions as to what God's will is – both for them, and for the Church. Unless we are to claim that some people listen to God and get the correct answer, while others listen and get the wrong one, then we need to acknowledge that there are problems in our human interpretation of what God is saying – as so often happens in the Gospels when the disciples hear Jesus do we just miss the point?

Historically this is why the Church of England has sought to encompass the widest range of views – including ones that are opposed to each other – we seek to find God within our differences rather than dividing ourselves from fellow Christians by our own opinions. We seek to balance God revealed in scripture with God communicated by tradition, and God experienced then described in reasoned thinking. This is one of the great strengths of the Anglican way of being Church – we admit that we might be wrong and seek to listen to those who hear God in different ways – that we might gain a fuller picture of who God is.

So as we prepare for Pentecost, let us celebrate the gift that God gives by drawing alongside us in our daily lives through the power of the Holy Spirit, and let us rejoice that in our human differences we might find the deepest truths of God. For the Spirit is sent not to divide the body of Christ, but to build it in strength that we might truly live in the love of God.

And now let us pray...

God, who didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people by sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit:
grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort;
through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee,
in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, now and for ever.