

One of the pleasures of coming to live in Howth is the opportunity it has afforded me to get out onto the water. The basic points of sailing, let alone the finer points, are still something of a mystery to me but I have a fascination with the power of the water, of the wind. Sailing is clearly a matter not of domination of that power but rather one of working with, harnessing that power.

At the heart of it all is knowing how to catch the wind in the sails – when do you haul them in tight, when do you let them out. But you know, even I know, when you have got it right – there is a surge of power, the boat heels over, starts to pick up speed. And it is not just a matter of switching it on and then sitting back. You have to keep a constant eye out for changes in wind speed and direction, be constantly ready to change the set of the sail, change direction. If the boat is to maintain speed there has to be a constant attentiveness to that unseen power of the wind.

Our Gospel reading for this Trinity Sunday is from John's account of the meeting of Jesus with Nicodemus by night. In this passage Jesus speaks of new birth, using that expression 'born again' that has been interpreted in so many different ways. Speaking of birth in the spirit, Jesus uses the analogy of the wind:

<sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' *John 3:8*

What strikes me about this passage is the elusive nature of the Spirit. The Spirit is not something to be manipulated or controlled, only waited upon. Two Sundays ago, the Sunday after Ascension Day, we reflected on the disciples being told to wait, to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the course of our reflections, we thought of the disciples called to an attentive passivity, a radical openness to God and all that he wanted to impart through his Spirit. An openness in which I let go of all my own preconceived ideas, all my own personal agendas and preferences and wait upon God..

To do this I need to remember that God is bigger than my understanding. God is not confined by the narrow confines of my understanding, by my attempts to define or to contain him or her.

The doctrine of the Trinity, our understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God, which lies behind the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed comes much later than the New Testament accounts. But within the New Testament we get the beginnings of the later doctrine. In the Gospels Jesus will talk of the function of the Spirit as that of guiding his followers into all the truth; will talk of the Father dwelling in him and him in the Father. Paul in our Epistle today talks of the Spirit working in and through us, enabling us to call upon God as Abba. Elsewhere he will talk of the Spirit informing and enabling our prayers.

There is something in us that wants to tie God down in our definitions. And so as we paint our word pictures, we need to remember that mere words can never do justice to that which we are trying to describe. The words we use can never go beyond picture and symbol. How can you define the God who encountered Isaiah in the shaking pillars and smoke of the Temple and Elijah in the still small voice as he hid from his enemies in the desert cave; who expressed extravagant and profligate love in the mystery of the Incarnation – the life, the passion and death of Jesus; who in the Spirit encounters us in the contradictory images of descending dove and wind and tongues of fire.

When we try to tie God down in our definitions we end up not limiting God but limiting ourselves. I recall, in the period following the decision of the Church of Ireland to proceed with the ordination of women, discussing the issue with a Presbyterian colleague. He insisted that scripture dictated that it could never happen. I asked him did that mean that God could never call a woman to ministry in the Church – that surely placed a limitation on the sovereignty of God. Our attempts to place limitations on God end up limiting our

understanding of what God can do in the life of the world, in the Church, in the lives of each one of us.

I come back to the picture of the sailor. The sailor works not by trying to dominate the power of the wind and the wave. Sailing is rather a matter of working with, harnessing that power. There is something of an elusiveness, an unpredictability to the wind – we don't know where it is coming from and we don't know where it is going. That all requires an attentiveness, a readiness to respond as the wind and the tides change.

There is something of that elusiveness in the certainty of our faith