

We have now arrived at the Feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. We read as our lesson the account given in the Acts of the Apostles of that coming of the Spirit. I suppose if we are honest with ourselves the images of tongues of fire, rushing wind, people talking in strange tongues does not fit easily with our Anglican sensibilities. Of all the persons in the Trinity, the role of the Holy Spirit is something we find hard to define. We feel more comfortable with God the Father, and his role in creation. The figure of God the Son, we can easily identify with the person of Jesus, his teaching and healing, his cross and resurrection. So what pictures do we have in our mind of the person and action of the Holy Spirit.

The first thing I would say is that the ‘Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Lord’ is a recurring theme right through the Bible. We hear of the Spirit of God at creation moving across the waters. We hear of the Spirit of the Lord coming upon kings and upon prophets. The Spirit is very much God present and active in the world. The Spirit comes upon people for a purpose. And so in a passage from Isaiah read by Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum, the prophet declares:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion--
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,

the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. *Isaiah 61:11-13*

In Luke's Gospel, this is a passage that Jesus takes to declare the nature of his own ministry. The Spirit is given to the Church to enable it to continue the work of Jesus in the world. And so the Revised Catechism, in speaking of the role of the Spirit, declares; 'The Holy Spirit enables me to become more like Jesus.'

To go back for a minute to the work of the prophets like Isaiah. These were men who stood before kings and people to speak and act in the name of God. They were not there to be fortune tellers. They were there to call people to repentance, to call them back to God. Part of that was speaking very plainly of things that had gone badly wrong in society. And so they will speak of issues of justice – of merchants using crooked scales, of workers' wages being withheld. They will condemn immorality in society, of the intrusion of elements of pagan worship. They pour scorn on the way in which lip service is paid to religion that has no impact on people's daily life, painting a picture of the merchant asking when will this Sabbath be over so that I can get back to cheating my customer? When they talk of the future, it is often in terms of the consequences that will fall upon a society that refuses to change.

So maybe we can say that part of the function of the prophet, the one in whom and through whom the Spirit of the Lord is active, is to say to the society of his day, 'Things can be, things must be, different.' This takes me to the passage from Joel that is quoted in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in Peter's speech to the crowd after the coming of the Spirit.

that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.

You will often hear people saying; ‘So and so is an awful dreamer’. In dreams we imagine things differently to the way they are. Sometimes that is comforting, or in the case of a night mare distressing. One of the key moments in the American Civil Rights movement was a large march on Washington headed by the late Dr Martin Luther King. The speech he made that day has gone down in history.

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

I have a dream Martin Luther King Aug. 28, 1963

One of the functions of the Spirit that I just want to leave with you today is that of inspiring and empowering the dreamers, the men and women who look upon the world, the society in which they are living, who challenge the complacency, the indifference of their fellow citizens, and say ‘This can be, this must be different.’ It was dreamers, visionaries such as Wilberforce who

in the 19th century, inspired by deep Christian conviction, not only said slavery was wrong but who, in the face of trenchant opposition from vested interests, worked tirelessly for its abolition.

Coming closer to home, the late Rev Ray Davey, founder of the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland, came home from a Japanese prisoner of war camp. He became acutely aware of the many divisions, not only religious but also social, in Northern Ireland and dedicated himself to a ministry of reconciliation. During the darkest times of the Troubles, the Corrymeela Centre in Ballycastle became a refuge for those whose lives had been shattered by the violence but also a neutral place where some of the first tentative steps were taken in building bridges of understanding.

May God raise up in each generation dreamers, men and women of vision, who will speak God's word of truth, of justice, of integrity and may the world listen to their voice.