

Whitsunday B 2024 19/05/24

The name Whitsunday declared by the Church in England in the Book of Common Prayer and used since ancient times which is also called 'Whitsun' is thought to derive from the Anglo-Saxon word 'wit', meaning 'understanding', which commemorates the disciples being filled with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. It was the first holiday of the summer in the northern hemisphere so Whitsun was one of the favourite times when I was growing up in the UK and Whit Sunday, or the following week, was a time for celebration. This took the form of fêtes, should I put in brackets (*worse than death*) fairs, pageants and parades, with Whitsun ales and Whitsun Cake and Morris dancing in the south of England and Whit walks, Club Days and wakes in the north. In my home country of Wales I grew up with the Whitsun Treat- the annual parish picnic trip to the beach- usually Porthkerry west of Cardiff with pebbly uncomfortable beach, a rainy day, freezing cold brownish sea water, at the end of the runway of Cardiff airport. It was bit like the Kerrigans in the movie *The Castle* "We are going to Bonnie Doon, Bonnie Doon. Feel the serenity, the serenity.... Some of us would bring our fishing rods and say things like DAD RECKONED THAT FISHING WAS 10% BRAIN AND 95% MUSCLE. AND THE REST WAS JUST GOOD LUCK....

Whitsunday/Pentecost occurs around 50 days after Easter. Perhaps it took time for the Spirit to germinate and grow within the Apostles, as it takes time for all seeds to germinate and grow, or perhaps Jesus' physical presence had to be ascended first in order to make room for and allow the outpouring of the spirit. What is certain is that it infused into creation and created the restlessness within the human heart, that causes many to search for meaning, found most profoundly in the Christian Faith, as St Paul noted in his Letter to the Romans chapter 8:

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning ...
and not only the creation, but we ourselves,
who have the first fruits of the Spirit.*

In the Gospel the Holy Spirit is described as an Advocate. An advocate could be described as : "a powerful and influential person who defends or maintains a cause or proposal on our behalf." Someone working for us and on our behalf can be very beneficial when we are in some kind of difficulty or trouble. Someone working for us and on our behalf in life with integrity has value beyond description. In other words, a strong human advocate can save us from dire situations in which we might find ourselves.

Whether or not you will ever need a competent Advocate to represent you in a trial, you do need a competent and strong Advocate for life. That is what is being offered in our Gospel. In another place Jesus says, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father — the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father — he will testify about me" (John 15:26). The Holy Spirit, our Advocate, makes the difference between eternal life and eternal death by leading us to faith in Jesus.

On Whitsunday there is a tendency to see the arrival of the Holy Spirit as a 'job done' – we cheer, we celebrate, and then comes a growing unease as such manifestations of the Holy Spirit are somewhat limited, and not an everyday occurrence in most Christian's lives. Perhaps we have made a mistake, wanting to celebrate the harvest, without putting in the work of preparation, sowing and waiting for growth. On the first Whitsunday, the first Christian Pentecost, the Spirit gave the disciples the ability to communicate with others, in language they could understand, so the Holy

Spirit is about communication, finding the right words and actions which give affirmation to our beliefs.

The Holy Spirit testified to the apostles about Jesus Christ. On Pentecost Day, a harvest festival for the Jews, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and other believers and the Church of Jesus Christ was born. The Advocate confirmed the meaning of what had happened to Jesus and the apostles became the pillars on which the emerging community of God, called the Church, One Holy Catholic and Apostolic was built and upon which this Church is built.

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us today. How? In many direct and indirect ways, through the sacraments and of course through the preaching of the word. Therefore every sermon needs both law and gospel in it. We all need to hear both judgment and grace. In times gone by there was so much law in the preaching and teaching of our churches that there was a great imbalance. Today, the imbalance is in the opposite direction. Sermons tend to go lightly or not at all into that dangerous zone.

Of course, the gospel of grace for sinners is good news. For God is more willing to forgive than we are to ask for forgiveness. The undeserving prodigal son was welcomed home by his loving father and God and is better than any human father could ever be. Grace is free, but its never cheap. It cost Jesus his life.

Because God made me in his image, he gave me the power to resist him and his ways. To be made in God's image means that I have the freedom to resist or accept what God has done for me, to ignore my Creator, or love him in response to his love for me. My sin is to use my God-given freedom to turn away from the God who loves me. It is like God has written a check for a million dollars, but I have the freedom to sign the back of the check or never sign or cash it. Who would be so foolish as not to endorse the gift? Yet many do just that.

In John 16:13 Jesus says, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth." In other words, the Advocate justifies us before God and sanctifies us as well. As sanctified sinners we are called to share faith with others. That's called witnessing. Every Christian is not an evangelist (only *some* as Ephesians 4:11 says), but *every Christian is a witness* (Acts 1:8). Evangelists are called to *declare the gospel*; witnesses are called to *share the gospel*. That may seem like a small distinction, but it is an important one.

Our job as Christian witnesses isn't to convert people. Only the Holy Spirit can bring a person to faith in Christ. Our job is to provide the context for people to come to faith by being invitational, welcoming and inviting people to come to worship, a Bible study, or a social activity at church where they can meet us. Our job is to introduce or re-introduce them to Jesus and his Church by words and deeds, to be good neighbours and most importantly to be proud of our faith. Not to keep our light under a bushel. So that hopefully they will see what they are missing in our community. As we say at the Offertory in the Book of Common Prayer quoting St Matthew: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." People want something real, something to take home to the street where they live- we can be more and more a part of that for them in this very Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.

A nation or a world that puts its trust in anything that it has created itself will find that it has built an idol which will fall. It may be wealth, it may be finance, it may be an economy, it may be an

ideology or political philosophy it may be any human institution. It will fall. It will fall. Peter's message on that first Whitsunday Pentecost was a call to "repent", literally, to turn around; to change direction. Now is the time to turn from anything other than dependence on God. Now is the time to seek God, to receive the very life of God. An individual, a church, a society, a world that puts trust in God, revealed in Jesus Christ, full of the Spirit of love, will see a new explosion of purpose and hope.

This is a purpose which costs everything and returns more than we can imagine. It cost Jesus everything to give this life to us. Our response means we can share in that life. We are caught up in more abundant life than we can imagine. We become the people of God for a world seeking light in darkness.

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