



Pentecost
24 May 2015

The Holy Spirit

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: Acts 2.1-21; Romans 8.22-27; John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15

I wonder if you've ever seen the Holy Spirit at work? Acts of the Apostles describes the coming of that Spirit in dramatic terms – the rush of a violent wind that fills the entire house where they were sitting, tongues of fire resting on the heads of each of the disciples, and then suddenly this ability to speak in other languages, to communicate with others in what seems like a bewildering burst of divine empowerment. The Holy Spirit changes things, it breaks down barriers. The description of its coming seems like a moment of liberation, a moment of breaking free. But this Holy Spirit is not simply the muse or inspiration of a dramatic moment. The word that John's Gospel keeps using again and again is the word 'dwell'. This Spirit, this *Parakletos* is the one who comes in answer to our call – and comes to stay. It is the Spirit of the indwelling Christ. Have you ever seen that Holy Spirit at work?

As I thought about that question I thought about the last week of my life and three examples of the Holy Spirit at work. The first thing I thought about was an event that took place here at St Martin's last Monday night when we hosted in this church the Templeton Prize Ceremony. On the face of things it seemed a very prestigious, formal event. The guests were all sent the most beautiful invitations and we were directed to our assigned seats. The front of the church had a raised stage area that looked a little like a television studio with modern high spec chairs and the most amazing autocue system that telescoped up into the air every time someone spoke. Around the church were flat screen TV monitors and the ceremony was being filmed from various angles and locations. Everyone had been invited to come in formal attire and our invitations were checked as we entered. The introduction to the ceremony set the scene. We were told how Sir John Templeton's vision had been to identify "entrepreneurs of the Spirit – those who devote their talents to expanding our vision of the intangible and deeper realities of human purpose." We were told how spiritual progress – qualities of compassion and care – had been scientifically proven to lead to higher qualities of life, success, motivation and well-being. The outstanding person who had inspired "spiritual progress" would receive a prize of £1,100,000. It was a highly polished performance – but it has to be said until that point it felt a bit like we were about to witness the release of a new Apple *iPhone* or *tablet*.

Up until the point, that is, that the recipient was helped to the podium. John Vanier is elderly now, tall and quite gangling. Despite the formal dress of everyone present he himself was wearing an ordinary open neck shirt and old anorak – he wrapped his tall frame around the lectern and looked around the audience with a smile that lit up the church. And without any notes or autocue or affectation he told us that all of us have to learn, he said, that every single person is important. This realisation, he said, had come to him through the privilege of sharing his life with those with disability. While disability had in the past been seen as a thing of shame, for him and many others it was so-called disabled people who had shown him the way to God. "You see," he said "if you become the friend of the rejected, you are changed – you learn to live a life that is no longer a prison or a fortress, or a locked upper room, but a belonging which opens us up, a belonging which is a becoming." Such belonging opens up our own vulnerability – and it is here that God makes his dwelling. What we have to do in our world, he said, is "to rediscover that each person is precious. Those who rise up in anger have a story of humiliation that has never been heard. What people are yearning for," he said, "is to be seen as beautiful."

And then, as by way of example, he asked a member of *L'Arche* Community to read the passage from the Bible about the person who invited important guests to a wedding feast but all made excuses why they couldn't come. So the owner of the house said "go out into the roads and the lanes and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame so that my house shall be full." We listened as the woman from *L'Arche* read. She was a person who would have been described as having mental disability. But what was more obvious was that this was not disabling but **enabling** the story to be heard again in a way we had never heard it before. She read with care and attentiveness, pronouncing each word painstakingly – totally focused upon a parable which turned our Templeton gathering upside-down. And then among the congregation members of the *L'Arche* Community began to hold up huge red hearts. We had not noticed them mixed among the formal suited guests but now they stood up and the Holy Spirit seemed to be breaking loose and a song began:

I come like a beggar with a gift in my hand
I come like a beggar with a gift in my hand
By the hungry I will feed you
By the poor I make you rich
By the broken I will mend you
Tell me which one is which

It was a parable taking place in our midst – they started to fill a table with bread and fruit and grapes and then they began to dance up the aisle without affectation or embarrassment but with joy. Jean Vanier held by his hands and dancing in their midst surrounded by those of all types of ability and disability and we in our stiff formal attire felt our own inhibitions and disabilities dissolving and perhaps longed for the same Holy Spirit which opened up a life of God's call – the possibility of becoming more human. And so too shy to dance we did that formal, spontaneous thing which British people do – we clapped; clapped as loud as we could because we had heard and seen a truth that had come without invitation into our upper room and changed not only the rules but if we were really honest, life itself.

Last week I also saw the Holy Spirit in Hope Barrett of Brixton. I visited her in hospital where she lay in a coma after a stroke. She was in intensive care. A young nurse was looking after her attentively. I told her she was looking after a saint. I told her of how every day Hope Barrett danced on the steps of St Martin's and rang my doorbell at 6.00am to wish me good morning. I told her how she came to Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer and Club Wednesday and Archers, and Meditation and Bread for the World and the Prayer Breakfast and washed up each week for the Sunday International Group. I told her how she's walked our Annual Pilgrimage to Canterbury, often in a pair of Crocs. I see her now – Adam holding her hand leading her through a field of waist high yellow rapeseed and poppies. I spoke to Hope even though her eyes were shut. I told her how I knew she was on the side of the Angels. I hope she heard. Her eyes fluttered. I told her how much we at St Martin's loved her. She had had a hard life. Being a single mum had not been easy, and she's struggled with mental health difficulties for so many years, and yet what struck me was how full of the Holy Spirit she was – lit up by it like a Belisha beacon, forever bearing her gifts to church – newspapers and bags, and books and one day a baby bath and another a garden fork, but most of all her own gentle presence. Hope of Brixton who phoned up Radio London between 4.00-5.00am most days to give a Christian message or share a thought. Speaking to her there in hospital I realised more than ever what it means to dwell in the Holy Spirit. Hope had been radiating those fruits of the Holy Spirit ever since I have known her – love, joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness and humility and gentle laughter – swimming up and down the pool with them at the Brixton Rec. I asked her to pray for me and to pray for all of us at St Martin's because she was and will be our advocate. She passed away on Friday night. The first day of the Pilgrimage she would have been on. Death will do Hope no hope because in truth – eternal life had already begun in her. It is we who are poorer without her indwelling Spirit.

This last weekend I have met the Holy Spirit on the Pilgrimage to Canterbury with 100 others. A Holy Spirit which breaks down the barriers which divide. A Spirit that listens rather than demands, a Spirit which shares rather than grasps, a Spirit which opens one's eyes to the humanity of another and in so doing helps you to rediscover your own true humanity. On that road to Canterbury I have heard stories of people's lives not defined by job or status or house but offered – like sacrament signs of God's grace. Grace in the sharing of food, in the carrying of one another's bags, in the washing and patching of feet, in laughter, in silence, in aches and pains, in halls and churches filled with communal snoring. And joy and hope have come out of hiding and a new order of things is born – and though feet ache and bones stiffen there is an expanding of the soul with the things of God. There is something beautiful here despite the sweat, the blisters, the lack of hot water, the inadequate toilets. There is a Spirit here that would be worth giving one's whole life for: the Spirit of God which broadens and deepens the human family. The Spirit dwelling in all creation and experienced as we have felt rain, experienced as we have walked the shape of hills, known the shadows and the sunlight, felt the sting of nettles and the smell of trees and grass. We have known that something greater than us dwells here.

I wonder when you have felt the Holy Spirit, or felt the Holy Spirit to break through your locked doors. I bet there are thousands who feel that Spirit in Ireland today after the referendum that has swept away so many years of injustice, guilt, prejudice and discrimination, and faithful love can be celebrated. I wonder how we can create opportunities for the Spirit to arise in us – with its beauty and challenge and transforming power. I wonder how we can let go of our own need to control or dominate, or our own fears and obsessions, and rediscover the beauty of God in us and in our neighbour as equals before God. What is it, this Spirit? It is a Spirit of Truth. Not a narrow truth we impose in order to defend our territory but a truth which sets us free. I wonder how, as Jean Vanier said, we can let go of our own story of humiliation and fear and rediscover the story of God's Holy Spirit which dwells with us.