

**Pentecost 2016 – Choral Evensong**

**John 16: 4b – 15**

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. We're celebrating God's gift of the Holy Spirit. And if we were to do a word association game, I wonder what thoughts or words we'd instantly associate with Holy Spirit. We might say *Power* – "Go in the power of the Spirit." We might say *Confidence*, because on the day of Pentecost, the Apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit were given a new confidence which transformed them: no longer inarticulate provincial working men, cowering in an upper room, they had the confidence to speak and preach in public.

We might talk about the *gifts* of the Spirit; how each of us has distinctive gifts or abilities all of which combine and complement each other to make us a well-balanced, well-functioning community. We might talk about the *fruits* of the Spirit; those virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control

which are traits of human nature which we say are evidence of the Holy Spirit's activity.

We may associate the operation of the Holy Spirit with some of the phenomena which are associated with charismatic worship: speaking in tongues, prophecies, ecstatic utterances; people being slain in the Spirit, keeling over, momentarily unconscious as they experience God's healing Spirit. We might, if we're honest, associate talk of the Holy Spirit with a rather distasteful enthusiasm.

The Holy Spirit is all these things, and more, and we celebrate them all today. But none of these instant associations with the Holy Spirit touch on the way the Holy Spirit is spoken of in our New Testament lesson this evening from St. John's Gospel. Here we find the Holy Spirit being spoken as a Counsellor and as the Spirit of Truth. And the two are connected. Because it is the Holy Spirit that gives us the wisdom - or counsels us - which gives us the wisdom to judge

between un-Christ-like things (or sin, if you like) and the righteousness of Christ. So the Holy Spirit is about discernment; discernment between right and wrong; between wisdom and folly; between successfulness and justice; between wealth and richness.

And the way Jesus puts it in this reading from John is that this Spirit of Truth will declare to us “the things that are to come.” It is the Holy Spirit that assists us to regulate our lives to correspond better with the Kingdom of God. It assists us bridge between the “now” and the “not yet”; between the world in which we live, and the world as we know it should be. And this applies as much to our social and economic and political arrangements as it does to our personal conduct.

And the point about operation of the Spirit of Truth is that it is dynamic and pro-active. It is more than a facility to be able to recognise what is wrong; or to be able fantasise about what things could be like if only

we weren't limited by the hard facts of life. It's not just theoretical with the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit inspires and equips us to implement the vision. We live with hope. We live, as far as we can, with the values of the Kingdom that is “not yet”; and by so doing we partially establish that kingdom in the here and now. Of course, we can never do more than establish it partially this side of heaven. But the Holy Spirit inspires us, nevertheless, to keep chipping away celebrating signs of the Kingdom.

So that's what the Counsellor, the Spirit of Truth can do, but it doesn't necessarily get us any further working out how it happens. It happens through our religious observance. We gather for worship, we are transformed by it and we are commissioned from it into lives of service. The life of the church is like a heart-beat, gathering to send, gathering to send, gathering to send . . .

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

The process of transformation doesn't have to be spectacular or dramatic. The Holy Spirit often operates in us in more subtle ways than ecstatic utterances. I don't realistically expect that anyone will stand up in the middle of Choral Evensong and start prophesying in tongues, but I'm absolutely serious in declaring that the Holy Spirit is present among us now and has been operating on us as we have observed this beautiful, time-honoured, seemingly liturgy.

The Holy Spirit has been operating on us by creating in us a disposition with which to conduct our lives; and an assumption of the values that we will carry into all our encounters. Liturgy, the observance of religious ritual, shapes a mode of being that is something between just guiding our instincts and processing ethical decision making.

We've got to be a bit careful about how this works through the medium of the Book of Common Prayer. If we're not careful we can end up emotionally and

psychologically crippled, convinced that we are lost sheep in whom there is no health. We probably need to be liberated a bit by a corrective to that. But on the whole, repeating the words of the liturgy week by week, singing the hymns and hearing the anthems season by season, hearing God's word proclaimed in the cycle of the calendar; all this has its effect on us.

The effect is to propel us out of those doors at the end of the service as people equipped to recognise, name and celebrate God's presence in the lives into which we are sent; and to work for his praise and glory to establish justice and peace and a respect for the integrity of his creation. It is he counsellor, the Spirit of Truth, that does this; and that that is what he does is what we celebrate today.

Amen.