

Pentecost, C, I Cor 2.6-end

Many of us love the hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'. It's about the only hymn where the congregation attempts a strong dynamic contrast, in the final verse: **speaking through the earthquake wind and fire; O still small voice of calm, O still small voice of calm** – and they do it even though it's hard to put on the brakes and sing quietly way up there!

If you came to church this morning you would have heard the classic passage from the Acts of the Apostles, about the coming of the Holy Spirit in wind and fire at the birthday of the Church:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

That's what we're singing loudly about in the famous hymn; but what about the still small voice of calm? Where and when do we experience that? The events of Pentecost were in one sense unrepeatable. Whether we come from a tradition that emphasises the signs and wonders of the Spirit or not, Pentecost was the one time in history when, as it were, the dam blocking the flow of God's life into the world was breached and the waters gushed through; when the forest fire leapt and blazed over a parched land. Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension opened the way for this overwhelming, incendiary gift of God among us.

This was the ground Canon Steve was covering in the first talk of our sermon series on the Holy Spirit – the impact of the Spirit upon individuals and the Christian community: which allows me to plug the next talk on Weds at 7.30 in Prior's Hall, to be given by our Canon Theologian Vernon White, on, 'Who and where is the Holy Spirit?' And I'm sure that at the very least the Spirit will be *there*, to inspire Vernon! What I'm going to say now may be a bit of a taster for that session, too.

It may be a matter of temperament, but I'm rather keener of the still small voice element of the Spirit's work. This is what we heard about in our NT lesson from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul is battling against those who reckon themselves to be wise. They have persuasive ways of putting across their case, but by God's own standards of wisdom they are foolish.

God's wisdom is not some secret truth hidden away from people, but is the wisdom that gave Jesus up to be crucified for the salvation of the world. It is a strange and uncomfortable wisdom indeed, involving the death of a condemned criminal to bring the flood and flame of Life into creation, but it is there before all our eyes. The trouble is not what wisdom is, but how can we know what it means?

Paul appeals to our experience of ourselves. The only person who knows what's going on inside each of us is us-ourselves. Our own spirit can plumb our depth and possess whatever is going on inside. That is surely the attraction of our Antony Gormley's Sound II: as people descend into the depths of this building, they see in the Crypt this heavily contemplative figure who seems to be in a still possession of himself, as he sounds the depths of his own spirit. This calm self-awareness provokes reflection in us, just as for a lot of the year the water in the Crypt offers a reflection of the sculpture itself.

Paul is arguing that it is our *spirits* which help us know ourselves, and this is akin to God's own knowledge of himself. When Christ died upon the cross, God the Father did not look on from afar, wondering what on earth was going on. He knew what was happening, and he knew what was happening from the inside. So when Christ suffered, God experienced suffering in Christ; and when Christ died, God tasted death in Christ, as another hymn puts it in poetic shorthand - 'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies.

Now the Spirit of God belongs to God. That is why he is called the Holy Spirit, because only God is holy. But he is also given by God to us so that we can share in what he knows. Let me say that again: we can share in what God knows!

I wonder whether we are really Trinitarian believers. A believer in one God, a monotheist, may well believe that God's will can be known and followed by meditating on some sacred text, that God's presence can be felt, that we can love him. But none of this is necessarily Trinitarian faith. A believer in the three-personed God believes that we can be drawn into the *inside* of God's life, so that we can come to know and love God's will as our own will, so that we can come to think and understand as God thinks and understands, so that his wisdom becomes our wisdom. As Paul puts it, against the self-appointed wise ones, 'we have the mind of Christ'.

In the Spirit we no longer stand outside God looking in, but he is in us and we in him. We are no longer servants but friends. And the stumbling block of the crucifixion of Jesus becomes the cornerstone of our believing: we see there not a criminal execution, but the purposes of God consummated in the self-sacrifice of God's only Son. We begin to know the tremendous cost of love, finding a way to bring the

greatest good out of the greatest evil in his bursting from the tomb. It is possible to know this, not as a fact but as a life-disclosing mystery.

But, honestly, do we want to know it? On Friday night there was the final episode of a TV series called *Blood, Sweat and Luxuries*, when six young people saw behind the stage of consumerism. They were in the Philippines in a factory building electronic components for our gadgets, on a production line where ceaseless efficiency and mindless autonomy were everything. The alternatives for the young women who worked there were prostitution or scavenging and reclaiming domestic waste.

One young woman at the factory worked to feed and educate her family, her mother, siblings and her own young son, but hardly ever had time to travel to see them. When she did, her son did not recognise her and cried when her own mother tried to hand him over to her for a hug. It was heart-rending to watch, as it was for the young, privileged woman who visited her home.

When the group returned to the UK it was hardly surprising that their attitudes and values were hugely changed. They shopped differently; they began to raise money for the people whose lives had touched theirs; they appreciated just how much they had and the non-material things that were much more important. Before they hadn't wanted to know the cost of what they could buy so freely and easily, but now that they did know, their lives were changed.

Paul's opponents believed that knowledge was elitist, that only the 'mature' had access to it; but actually the Spirit had brought universal access to God's wisdom; all that was needed was openness to the Spirit to receive the mind of Christ. What held them back and what holds us back - is the *fear* of what this knowledge is.

The knowledge we would have if we said yes to the Spirit is the knowledge of what God's love could achieve in and through us. The still small voice in us would be reassuring us that there was something we were each called to do to bring about love's victory; and we would be calm, not because life was comfortable but because we had the comfort of life welling up within us, as living water.

As the woman at the well said to Jesus as he approached her: 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ...Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

And what do we say in our own, desperate thirst for wisdom and life?