

Some words for Pentecost Sunday

*'For, bringing your Paschal Mystery to completion, you bestowed the Holy Spirit today on those you made your adopted children by uniting them to your Only Begotten Son.'*¹



Readings:

Acts 2:1-11

Psalms 103:1, 24, 29-31, 34. R.v.30

1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13

John 20:19-23

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Reaching back through history, to find a model or example that will help us to comprehend and face the challenge of the current pandemic, we find we quickly come to a halt at the Second World War. The experience of the war, still shaped and narrated by the stirring words of Churchill's oratory, and overlaid with decades of debate over myths and meaning, continues to resonate and help shape our society. Back then, faced with the mortal threat of war, society sought to protect itself and the lives of its citizens by the almost total mobilization of people and resources. Using the tool of conscription, vast swathes of the population were drafted into the armed forces and the frontline services then were the military ones, in contact with the enemy across land, air or sea. From Bevin Boys to physicists and Land Girls to film stars, the nation was put to work in their support.

Once again, the lives of our citizens are in peril, but this time it is the practitioners of the healing arts, doctors and nurses, who, together with their auxiliary personnel, constitute the frontline and it is hospitals and care homes that are the principle theatres of operations. As at the last time of national crisis, a vast logistical tail of support has been rapidly organised by way of carers, cleaners, schools (many are still open for the children of key workers), lorry drivers and food and delivery services, to say nothing of the utilities and internet providers who help keep us all warm, watered and connected. What is different this time is that it is only a portion of the population who are doing all this. The rest of us are restrained, either being unable to help by reason of age, condition, shielding or furlough or because we are regarded as non-essential in the circumstances, which can leave us feeling frustrated or somehow inadequate. Both then and now the guiding principle in determining what, when, how and by whom things should be done, was the saving of lives.

We recognise that the society of the early Church had the same priority - salvation, saving lives - and that it too had to come to grips with how this might be best achieved with the personnel and resources available. In contemplating the great feast of *Pentecost*, celebrated '*Fifty days*' after the resurrection of the Lord and often hailed as the 'birthday' of the Church, we can forget how new and, for the disciples, unexpected the whole thing in some sense was. The Jewish feast looked to celebrate the first fruits of the harvest. It has become for us the public declaration that Jesus Christ is the first fruit of the dead,² and that, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the gathering of a harvest of human hearts for the Lord is to be forever the principal work of the Church on earth. They had no committees or chiefs-of-staff to fall back on, where strategies for success might be modelled or mapped out, and seemingly no history to guide them either. Except, this is not strictly true of course, it turns out that they did have these things; they were just different, that's all.

I am often struck when reading the Acts of the Apostles by just how practical the early followers of Jesus were. Even before Pentecost the apostles and Our Lady were gathering for '*continuous prayer*,'³ and they recognised, out of a congregation of about one hundred and twenty,⁴ the need and method of electing a replacement for Judas and the criteria that the candidate must fulfil.⁵ Converts were to be incorporated by baptism, and the breaking of bread and the teaching of the apostles established fellowship and common life.⁶ Faced with an increase in the size of the community and struggling to organise the supply of food the Twelve saw they must dedicate themselves to the word of God and so laid hands on seven men, deacons, to undertake such practical tasks.⁷ Matters regarding the acceptance of Gentiles and

what could reasonably be expected of non-Jews soon came to the fore and an informal network of missions, gave rise to apostolic delegates and letters. Finally, a council, the first, was held in Jerusalem to determine matters for the whole Church.⁸ The disciples were 'People of the Book,' and many of them could read and were lettered; they could easily see in their smaller communities just what was needed and they knew the best people to do it.

The 'Book' the disciples read, the scriptures of the Old Testament as we think of them, constituted a historical guide and a repository of memory that told of God's dealings with his people. Seeing the scriptures anew, recognising how they both foretold and were fulfilled in the Lord, the disciples could take heart and draw courage from the example of Israel. They saw how God had called his people to be a light to the world, had freed them and formed them in the desert to inherit not just a promised land on earth but, they now understood, a place in the kingdom of Heaven that was open to all. Our 'Book,' the New Testament, but especially the Letters, records this process of practical organisation and proclamation, of both missionaries and mission. The words are infused with the sense of prayer and presence of God that so characterised the lives of the authors who were inspired to write them.

The scriptures reveal the work of the grace of Christ among his Body, for the most unique aspect of the life and mission of the Church is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus appears among the disciples in the closed room, he must twice calm them, *'Peace be with you,'*⁹ he repeats, as though anxious that they concentrate and really listen to what he has to say. *'As the Father sent me, so am I sending you,'*¹⁰ he continues; making it explicit that as he had enjoyed the authority of the Father now they in turn would enjoy his authority. Breathing on them, in the manner that God had breathed life into the body of Adam and Eve, Jesus bestows upon his disciples the breath of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as they *'receive the Holy Spirit,'*¹¹ they are given the God-given power to forgive sins. Rather like fermentation, the Spirit effervesced the apostles and, as Pentecost arrived, they finally burst forth ready in public to proclaim *'the marvels of God,'*¹² and discovered that *'filled with the Holy Spirit,'*¹³ people somehow *'from every nation under heaven [were] bewildered to hear these men speaking [their] own language.'*¹⁴

When confronted with reports of divisions among the quarrelsome early Christian community at Corinth, St Paul was distressed, he had himself lovingly helped establish the community there. Of particular scandal was that some people in the community were using their gifts to demonstrate their 'superiority' over others, who possessed seemingly more 'inferior' gifts. Pride was at play, and so Paul tells his

listeners that *'No one can say, "Jesus is Lord" unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit.'*¹⁵ He is reminding them that it is by the Holy Spirit that they have found the Lord and not by themselves. In speaking of spiritual things, the grace of the Spirit, Paul turns his attention to the unity and diversity of this wondrous gift of God. Think, Paul urges, it is *'always the same Spirit'*¹⁶ who is giving you your gifts, *'the same Lord'*¹⁷ you are seeking to serve and *'the same God who is working in all.'*¹⁸ As Jesus had once noted, *'no household divided against itself can stand.'*¹⁹ This fundamental unity of origin guarantees that the varied gifts, service and works *'given to each person is for a good purpose.'*²⁰ All the parts make up the one body of Christ, for *'In the one Spirit we were all baptised ... and one Spirit was given to us all to drink.'*²¹

As it remains to this day, the distinction of difference is testimony to the rich diversity of life within the Church. No one should be deemed non-essential or thought less of than anyone else. We might all be tempted to sometimes believe that life would be better if so-and-so self-isolated for the next five years but it is not true. Yes, we are all sinners and Christ died for us all, but we were all baptised also and therefore are all the recipients of his grace and Spirit. The unity of the Body of Christ on earth is one of its greatest strengths. People often speak of how on holiday they can go into a Catholic Church and feel at home; after all, the word catholic does mean universal. Whenever we gather, and most especially when we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, our unity is both nourished and affirmed. Our present condition therefore causes us genuine spiritual pain because the presence of our brothers and sisters is not only real enrichment but essential to the life of Christian faith, which sees communion with God and each other as the first fruit of true and eternal life.

In his 1845 novel, *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, the future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli identified the awful conditions in which most of England's working classes lived. Sadly, in this regard, the New Jerusalem that some hoped the post-war Welfare State would deliver has so far not materialised, and there are still far too many divisions concerning health, wealth, education and opportunity for society to be comfortable with. We would do well to remember that the NHS began its journey to birth within the pages of the 1942 Beveridge Report, commissioned by the non-partisan, cross-party government of national unity. However stretched and frayed here and bloated and sclerotic there – sometimes it seems it's not just some of the patients who have grown too fat in parts – the fruit of that moment of unity continues to serve us. We might pray therefore that some product of the current pandemic will be born that will continue to serve generations in the future. Two Nations at present, those in isolation and those who are not, we must somehow

become one again and the Church must continue to affirm that these two lungs are still part of the one body and, as our circulation resumes, tend to faint hearts and weary limbs. In tending to our own Body, week after week, year after year, the Christian long ago learned that, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we promote health of heart within us all.

*'Heal our wounds, our strength renew; on our dryness pour Thy dew;
wash the stains of guilt away; bend the stubborn heart and will;
melt the frozen, warm the chill; guide the steps that go astray.'*²¹

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

31 May 2020

The picture is a detail from *Pentecost*, El Greco, (1595-1605), Prado Museum, Madrid

1. *Preface*, Proper for Pentecost Sunday, *Roman Missal*

2. 1 *Corinthians* 15:20

3. *Acts* 1:14

4. *Acts* 1:15

5. *Acts* 1:21-26

6. *Acts* 2:41-47

7. *Acts* 6:1-7

8. *Acts* 15:2-35

9. *John* 20:20 & 21

10. *John* 20:21

11. *John* 20:23

12. *Acts* 2:12

13. *Acts* 2:4

14. *Acts* 2:6

15. 1 *Corinthians* 12:3

16. 1 *Corinthians* 12:4

17. 1 *Corinthians* 12:5

18. 1 *Corinthians* 12:6

19. *Matthew* 12:25

20. 1 *Corinthians* 12:13

21. *Sequence*, Proper for Pentecost Sunday, *Roman Missal*