

Pentecost Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

28th May 2023, St Mary's, 10 am

When Jacinda Ardern, the New Zealand Prime Minister resigned a few months ago she said she 'had no more in the tank'. It is a familiar feeling. We feel all used up. There is nothing more left. The well is dry. No doubt we plod on, we have to. But it is all a drag. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins felt this acutely particularly at this time of year, as when he wrote.

Birds build—but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

All around him nature was bursting with life, but he felt listless, dead, creating nothing worthwhile.

At this Pentecost we celebrate the fact that God does not just send rain on our dried-up lives but lives within them as a fountain of life. As Jesus said in today's Gospel 'Whoever believes in me, as scripture says, "Streams of living water shall flow from within him.'" Streams of living water within us.

When people think of God they mostly think of the creator of the universe, and it is true that moment by moment God holds all things in being above the abyss of nothingness. But for Christians God is more than this. He is also the love who has come close in Christ and who enfolds us. Then, and this is especially what we think of and celebrate on this Sunday. He is the Spirit within us making us alive with his life.

If you can cope with some rather abstract theology for a moment reflect on some words in the creed. Every Sunday we say.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

In the 11th century the Eastern and Western parts of the Church split apart over those words. Now, thank goodness there is much greater understanding and mutual influence. But then the East claimed that the words ‘and the son’ (filioque) were added later and are misleading. They were probably right, so the Church of England now allows just the words ‘from the father’ as an alternative. The point is that within the Godhead, the perfect filial response of the Son to the Father, is made possible by the Holy Spirit proceeding from the father and filling the Son.

And although these are limited human words pointing to a mystery beyond our full comprehension, they are vitally important not just for what it is for God to be God but what it is for us to be human. When Jesus was baptised, he heard the voice of the Father saying, ‘This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.’ And the gospel writer says that the Holy Spirit, symbolised by a dove, rested on him. It was that Holy Spirit which filled him, guided him, inspired him, strengthened him, which enabled him to live in perfect unity with the Father and to reveal what it is to be a human being.

So it is that this Trinitarian pattern of divine life is to be reproduced and lived out in our lives. As Paul said it is the Spirit within us that enables us to pray to God as ‘Abba, Father.’ God within us reaching out to God beyond us.

Now there may be a number of reasons why our lives might feel empty, or all used up, physical, psychological, or to do with diet or lifestyle. If this is the case this should be recognised and dealt with. These all have to do with human wellbeing, and human wellbeing, our own and that of other people is a desirable good. But over and above any of those factors there is the question of our spiritual wellbeing, and here the Holy Spirit has a crucial role to play. For it is the Spirit, enabling us to pray or in some way turn to God who first brings about that unity with God which is so fundamental. Then in the course of our Christian life that Spirit deepens and strengthen that unity through good times and bad.

In and through the experience of each day, the divine touches us and seeks to elicit a response. The Holy Spirit makes that response possible, illuminating, guiding, inspiring, strengthening in quite ordinary things.

Going through a barren period, Gerard Manley Hopkins cries out ‘Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.’

Jesus offers more than rain. He offers ‘Streams of living water within us. So, God is not just the ground of our being, but the fount from whom we flow, and that fount fills us within.

Psalm 84 has these words.

Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee: in whose heart are thy ways.

Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well: and the pools are filled with water.

Just recently I read the autobiography of the former rector of Barnes, Juergen Simonson, who died just recently called *From fear to faith*. Under his leadership this church was rebuilt, and its life transformed. His was a remarkable story. Of half Jewish background and the victim of Nazi antisemitism he was conscripted into forced labour, managed to escape and after a number of amazing bits of luck or providence managed not only to survive the war, but to get to England. He ends his book quoting that verse and adding.

I suppose that last phrase is a good summary of my life. The vale of misery turned most wonderfully into a well, the well of God’s goodness and grace. From this well I have drawn over and over again.

So, to God who moment by moment holds us in being, enfolds us with his love and lives within us as a fountain of life, be all glory now and for ever.