

St Mary-le-Tower Ipswich

Pentecost

Sunday 8th June 2014

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+In The Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

When faced with something we struggle to convey using language, we very often find that we turn to symbol. When we talk about God we find this to be the case most of the time and thus the church is full of symbols and metaphors.

Today is full of symbols par excellence! Pentecost - the coming of the Holy Spirit is about as difficult to get to grips with using language as anything is.

So we find ourselves surrounded by symbols... wind, breath, fire, dove and today in the reading from John's Gospel we seem to have a new and less obvious one - water! - so what's the link?

Looking at the reading we can see from what comes before this passage that the feast it refers to is 'The Feast of Tabernacles' which was for the Jews a sort of harvest feast. It comprised several rituals, one being the making of Lulavot - or palm branches which is what we associate with the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Another being the The Water Ceremony where the High Priest would lead the procession down to the Pool of Siloam, which was fed continually by the Gihon Spring - where he would fill a golden pitcher with water as the people waved their Lulavot singing the words from Psalm 118 - The Messianic psalm:

Save us we pray O Lord.

O Lord we pray, let us thrive.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of The Lord!

We bless you from the house of the Lord.

He would take it back to the temple and pour it out - a libation - or sacrifice down the altar steps of the temple. The water is a sign of that which gives life and nourishes the heart.

It was during this act that Jesus stood up and cried "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink....and out of the believers heart shall flow rivers of living water".

An impassioned plea and a sign that he is the Messiah and that it is he who gives life. John calls this, which Jesus is referring to, the Holy Spirit, our everlasting nourishment for life. It was to be fully released into the world after his death and resurrection.

Here we hark back to chapter 4 of John's gospel and Jesus words to the woman of Samaria at Jacob's Well - he tells here he will give her the spring of water welling up to eternal life. This water is to be the gift of The Holy Spirit to bring us life and nourish our souls.

Here we can link with another one of our symbols. At The Preparation of The Altar during the Eucharist the priest adds a drop of water to the chalice of wine and prays almost silently - "by the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in Christ's divinity, who humbled himself to share our humanity". This symbolises the inseparable union of Christ's divinity with our humanity, and for those who believe in him our inseparable union with His divinity through the gift of The Holy Spirit that flows in us and through us, an echo of what we celebrate at The Ascension - when Christ lifts our humanity to the height of His Throne, just as in the incarnation he, his divinity dwelt with humanity.

At the crucifixion when the soldier pierced the side of Jesus we are told clearly that blood and water flowed from his side, again seen as a sign of both humanity and divinity, and so St Cyprian suggests that the water in the Eucharist symbolises the Church - the human faithful - us - who are the body of Christ drawn into the the life of Christ through the indwelling of The Holy Spirit.

The symbol continues in that when we are in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit then, not only are we filled with the spring of water welling up to eternal life, but a spring of water which like the libation at the feast pours out of us and flows into the world. When we come to Jesus and receive his gift of The Holy Spirit then we are empowered to become fully alive and to be able to share that life with others.

When we are fully alive and that life flows from us it will reach out into the world and we are empowered to make disciples of others. A key purpose of the gift of the Holy Spirit is precisely to enable us to have within us the life of Christ so that we may give that life to others - and here comes the dirty word, the E word – it's called evangelism! It is what will lead to the growth of The Church and enabling others to be filled with the water that springs up to eternal life; it is what enables us to take seriously the words of Jesus recorded by Matthew – Go and make disciples of every nations... and behold I am with you always even to the end of the age, he is with us through the gift of His

Holy Spirit. We are those who know the joy of that spring welling up to eternal life in him. Why would we want to keep this gift to ourselves?

So the challenge for us is to really connect with the Holy Spirit that indwells us and to know, trust and feel that presence and power, to know its life breathing in us and flowing through us and from us.

As the wonderful last hymn (O Thou Who Camest From Above) puts it, we, with the help of The Holy Spirit, that Spirit of Jesus, must kindle a flame of sacred love in our hearts and there let it for HIS glory burn, with inextinguishable blaze till trembling to its source return..... then a clue as to how - in humble prayer and fervent praise!

One way of kindling this flame of letting the river of the Spirit flow is as we worship together, what we see in the reading from Acts and the account of the breathing of the Holy Spirit on the disciples in the upper room in John's Gospel, is that the Holy Spirit was not given in isolation, it comes into, and must flow out of community.

So as we gather as a community of faith we should feel drawn to connect with the Holy Spirit, sometimes this may be profound, others barely noticeable, but rather like what we eat, we may not be aware that it nourishes us - even the stuff we don't necessarily like very much, but it does! At other times we connect with the Holy Spirit within us through our interactions with others, maybe as we serve them, maybe as our hearts go out to those in need, and as we are drawn to pray for them.

Prayer is as much about tuning in to God and *his* concerns so that we can respond, as it is about asking him to sort it! What we will find is that when we take time to tune in the Spirit who prays in us, with sighs too deep for words, will lead us into all truth and we will see then places and ways God calls us to act in His world. We will become aware of what he has laid on our hearts.

It could be in so many places and ways that we encounter and are drawn close to the Holy Spirit that is within us and flows from us; and this should not surprise us, for as we know that The Spirit of God, just as it brooded over the waters in creation, fills the whole world, and us who believe in Jesus with the divine life of Christ.

We encounter that life of the Spirit in our daily lives, we encounter it in each other, we encounter it in The Eucharist. And so we pray

- Still let ME guard the Holy Fire and still stir up the gift in me.

Amen