

June 4th, 2006

On the evening of the first Easter Day, Jesus came to the disciples in their locked meeting place, and said to them: "Peace be with youHe breathed on them and said to them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:22) Fifty days later, on the Jewish Festival of Pentecost, the disciples were again gathered together and the Holy Spirit made His presence known to them and filled them with His grace and power. This is what we commemorate today.

It was a new experience. They had known God the Father - as Jews they had been brought up to know about God the Almighty, the Creator, and Jesus had made Him better known to them as Father. Jesus had been with them personally for some three years, and so they knew Him w^ell But although the Holy Spirit's action is recognised in the Testament - Genesis records for instance that in creation the Spⁱrit moved upon the face of the waters - and although Jesus had given them some preliminary instruction about Him, they did not yet know the Holy Spirit.

For many people still, their situation today is rather like that of the early disciples. The Holy Spirit is not really known. They are familiar with the formula of the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Ghost: He should be as well known as both the Father and the Son. But in point of fact He is not. There seems to be a tendency to think more of His power than of His Being: of grace simply as a gift: from God. An indication of this is shown by the few Prayer Book collects addressed to the Holy Spirit, whereas the majority are addressed either to the Father or to the Son.

There is today, both within and outside the Church, a vigorous movement:, called the Pentecostal or charismatic movement, seeking to redress this imbalance. As with all such new enthusiasms, danger lies in the possibility of overstressing what was previously underrated, and regrettably there are congregations where tragic disharmonv has occurred through enthusiasm and insensitivity on the one hand, and a reluctance to admit new vision on the other. There are Churches, divided from the mainstream of Christianity which make the Holy Spirit the major part of their concentration and worship.

Our responsibility is to accord to the Holy Spirit the same worship and consideration that we give to the father and the Son. As we will be reminded next Sunday, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the three Go-equal , Co-eternal Persons of the Holy Trinity.

The name "Spirit" and its older counterpart "Ghost", tends to lead people to think of something vague and impersonal and even spooky. But St. John in his Gospel quotes Jesus speaking about the Holy Spirit, saying: "You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you..... the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." And St. Paul refers to the Holy Spirit Himself making intercession for us, among a number of other references. The Holy Spirit is no mere impersonal influence

to those who are aware of His work and being. The use of the masculine pronoun for the Holy Spirit, as indeed for God the Father, is used because God is personal and not neuter, and the silly arguments about the use of masculine terms for God are meaningless and ignorant, because those terms do not refer to sexuality but to personality. God the Creator is a Person; God the Saviour is a Person; and so is God the Holy Spirit, and we use the masculine terms because of the limitations of language: there is no personal pronoun other than masculine or feminine.

We know the work of God the Father: He is the Creator and the sustainer of all things, visible and invisible. We know the work of God the Son: He is the Saviour and Redeemer of mankind - the Way, the Truth, and the Life. What is the work of God the Holy Spirit?

An old name for Him is the Comforter, and that title describes His work. But the modern meaning of the word limits the description, although it is true as far as it goes. It tells us that from Him comes the encouragement which can make us brave when things are difficult or temptation is strong. In the older meaning, the word meant "Strengtheners" as well. To comfort a child who has fallen over and cut his knee, not only means saying: "Cheer up, your knee will soon be better", but also washing the cut and bandaging it up as well.. The Holy Spirit is this kind of comforter. To all who listen to Him He gives not only encouragement and consolation, but warning and strength to counter temptation, and guidance in the choice of whatever action and decision to make. He is a practical helper. When the disciples became aware of His influence upon them, they became empowered to go out and face those of whom previously they were afraid. Pentecost is sometimes known as the Birthday of the Church, for from that moment the disciples set out to preach the Gospel to every creature, as Jesus had instructed, and which previously they had been too timid to even attempt. And in the power of the Holy Spirit the Church has carried on, and carries on still, the proclamation of the Gospel and the drawing of men and women into the kingdom of God. Where the Church has failed or fallen into error from time to time down the ages, it has been because its people have stopped looking to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, or have mistaken the drive of their own ideas and ambitions for that of the Holy Spirit's. Regrettably, that is quite easy to do - and Satan makes good use of the tendency! Only by faithful prayer and worship can we "tune in" and be receptive to God's influence and grace

When the early disciples received the Holy Spirit, their whole lives were changed. Even though they had been faithful followers of Jesus, a new power became available to them. And this is what pentecostalists or charismatics refer to in the term "baptised by the Holy Spirit". They mean that when a person becomes aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit working in him, and consciously and deliberately seeks to co-operate with Him, and draw on His power, then the effect of that realisation is like a new birth, a new start, a spiritual regeneration. With some, this new awareness is so tremendous that their joy bubbles out in laughter, excitement and even in unformed, unphrased vocal sounds called speaking in tongues. Unfortunately this has come to be an expected reaction and all too often is put on for effect.

Ideally the awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit should come with Baptism, if an adult has just turned to Christ, or at Confirmation if one has been baptised as an infant. The Baptism service refers to being given new birth by water and the Spirit. And in Confirmation we pray that the person may increase in the Holy Spirit, day by day. Likewise we should be aware of the outpouring of the grace of the Holy Spirit upon us via the other Sacraments. They are always channels of grace - the power of the Holy Spirit. But we are not always properly tuned in, as it were. So it happens that a Christian may go on faithfully worshipping and serving God, and still not be making full and conscious use of the power of God available. But when theoretical- knowledge turns into joyful awareness of God-within-us, then the promised fruits of the Spirit will ripen and become evident in our everyday lives. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – these are the fruits of the Spirit as set out by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (5:22). And if they are not showing up in us, we must ask whether we have really opened ourselves and welcomed God the Holy Spirit to take control of our lives.

"Spirit of mercy, truth and love,

O shed thine influence from above,
and still from age to age convey
the wonders of this sacred day.

Unfailing comfort, heavenly guide,
still o'er thy holy church preside;
still let mankind thy blessings prove,
Spirit of mercy, truth and love."

AMEN

Perhaps the most frequently used phrase in our worship is: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit". At the close of canticles, blessings, commendations, prayers - we have this formula or something similar used in giving praise to God the Holy Trinity.

It is sometimes suggested or implied that the Christian Church began with a very simple concept of God, but that because theologians were intent on turning Christianity into a mystery religion, with themselves leaders because nobody else could understand what it was all about, the Church now teaches a concept of God which is unnecessarily complicated and theoretical, a concept which seems to suggest that we have three gods rather than one. You will hear Mormons, Christadelphians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Unitarians pushing this one.

Actually the doctrine of the Trinity resulted from the efforts of theologians to unify and simplify what were three distinct types of religious experience in which Christians have been involved and still share today.

A description of the growing experience of God which was characteristic of an early convert may help us to understand the nature of this process. Imagine a young Roman citizen taken by a friend to see the reason for his new outlook on life, and to meet his new friends with a similar outlook. They make their way to an obscure part of the city; down into the catacombs beneath the city where they are stopped and asked for a sign or perhaps a password, for Christianity is still against the law. Perhaps the sign of the cross is made, or that of a stylised fish - for the letters of the Greek word for fish stood for the initials of the words: "Jesus the Christ, Son of God, Saviour". Although the visitor might not understand much of what is being said and done at this meeting, it would certainly be apparent that this group of men and women were of one mind, dominated by one spirit of love and worship. It would be clear that this Holy Spirit sustained the small secretive movement, giving those people courage to face torture, rather than deny their new-found faith; enabling them to stand firm against the powers of this world; giving them the will to take risks involved in commitment to a kingdom higher than the Roman Empire while they still lived and worked within that Empire. And with it, all, a sense of common concern and affection among all sorts and conditions of men and women.

Already this visitor was beginning to know the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. This was more than just good friendly clubbishness. He could see that these people were in touch with the greatest influence he had ever known - and that it was a divine influence.

This new influence, indeed this Holy Spirit, brought him back again and again to the group. He began to learn more and more about a certain Jesus who once lived in Nazareth, in Palestine. He learned that his new friends called Jesus the Messiah or Christ, and themselves Christians because they were Christ's man and women. As the figure of Jesus loomed before his awareness, through the life and teaching and example of his new companions, the time came when he too wanted to say as did the Apostle Thomas: "My Lord and my God," and to become Christ's man.

As he learned more about Jesus, he also learned about the Father who had sent Jesus into the world, He who had created and still sustains the world and all that is in it. Now this was not an entirely new idea for him. Like most people of his time he had always assumed that behind the gods of Roman and Greek mythology there was one of supreme power, majesty, and creativity. But now he learned that this Supreme God whom the Christians addressed as "Father", willed to be in personal relationship with His human creation; that He had acted through Jesus the Christ to make such a relationship possible.

To all this knowledge and experience this young hypothetical convert responded in faith and commitment. Like all Christians he had experienced God in three ways. In those days it would have been very easy to leave matters there: indeed to believe in three gods and to worship three gods would have been quite in keeping with the religions of the day, The fact is that because they did substitute one God for the many gods of current religious sects and the State religion, Christians and Jews were called atheists!

But within the Christian community there were two groups of people who would have found such a situation intolerable. Firstly the Jew, brought up to the cry "Hear, O Israel¹ the Lord our God is one Lord." The other was the enlightened Gentile, who would have found the assertion of more than one ultimate divine all-powerful Being philosophically unacceptable and beneath the intellectual standards of the day. So the problem became how to hold on to the oneness of God, and also to the fullness of their experience of God: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is surely plain then, that the theologians did not set to work to make a simple faith more complicated - rather they sought to make a concise statement of what was a complex spiritual experience in the lives of Christian people. What they tried to express was, and is, the living experience of the active power of God in three distinct relationships, and the conviction that in each of these experiences the Christian is in touch with God Himself, a God who is one, not three.

We believe that when a person knows Jesus, he is in touch with no-one less than Almighty God. That when one is moved by the Holy Spirit, he is moved by no-one less than Almighty God. That when we marvel at the wonders of creation - its beauty, its vastness, the minuteness of things within it - here too is Almighty God, whom we may call "Father" because He cares about us, individually and transitory as we are in this life on earth.

We believe that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not passing phases of God's activity; not just ways in which God appears at various times. Rather, we know them to be distinct, permanent, eternal Persons within the Holy Trinity. Jesus didn't come into being at His conception in Mary's womb - He put on human flesh and nature at that time, but He has always been the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Similarly, the Holy Spirit didn't come into our world for the first time at Pentecost - His presence was made known and vivid to the disciples at that time, but He has always been the Third Person of the Holy Trinity.

What Christians have come to discover in their three-fold experience of God is not illusion or delusion. In fact it is not so much man discovering something of the mystery of the nature of God, as God progressively revealing His nature to mankind as mankind becomes able and willing to accept and cope with that knowledge.

Because the Church has laboured to present the full understanding of God in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, people of all ages and races have been and are able to share the experience of Christians of the earliest times and to come into living touch with the Father, the Holy Spirit. An ancient document called the states: "The Catholic Faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unitv."

The key word is **worship**. We don't have to be theologians or wise men to worship God. All we need to learn about the Being, of God in order to be able to worship Him is summed up in these words from the traditional Church Catechism - regrettably not printed in the short edition of the new Prayer Book:

"First I learn to believe in God the Father, who has made me and all the world; Secondly, in God the Son, who has redeemed me and all mankind; Thirdly, in God the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies me and all the elect people of God."

May we always be glad to say: "Glory to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; as in the beginning,
so now and for ever."

AMEN

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST : YEAR B Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"We walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Cor.5:7)

The society in which we live is not a very patient one. People seem to be always rushing about, always in a hurry, always impatient. Instant coffee, instant soup, instant happiness. There are people who are happy just to sit dangling a fishing line in the water for hours on end, and happy whether they actually catch anything or not. There are gardeners who can plant seeds and not feel pressure a week or so later to scratch around and see whether or not they have germinated! But most people, by and large, are pretty impatient.

The parables in today's Gospel reading ought to be a strong reminder to impatient people, just to take it easy and let God's kingdom develop as He intends it to - quietly and steadily. Most of us tend to become very impatient in our desire and anxiety to see the kingdom of God come upon earth.

There were those among our Lord's followers who wanted Jesus to declare Himself as the Messiah, before He had time to teach them the kind of Messiah that He was. The Zealots, who were the nationalists of his day, wanted Him to put Himself at the head of the people and drive the Romans out of Palestine, and to set up a Jewish empire. Possibly the idea behind Judas' betrayal was to force Jesus to take a militant stand and create a showdown situation. But of course that was not the way the Kingdom was to come. The way of force is not the way of Jesus. The Kingdom will come, but in God's way and in God's good time.

"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." Jesus makes it clear by this parable that the issue is in God's hands, and so all will be well. The seed has been sown - is being sown all the time. The result is certain.- It may seem slow, but it is inevitable. The Lord's harvest will come.

So we must be patient and trusting, and not digging up the seed every so often to see how it is getting along: being too analytical, worrying because we do not see immediate progress and results. We must be patient too, with ourselves, in our own spiritual progress. There are times when our life is going very well - we can handle the crises confidently, we can pray with faith, we are glad to worship, our giving is done generously and joyfully. Then we slip for some reason - it might be that some problem crops up that gets beyond us; or our general health makes us crotchety and testy; or someone we trusted lets us down: we somehow get out of step, out of touch with God, and even our prayers and our worship become sterile. That is the time to be patient with yourself. Persevere, and you will come through, stronger than before.

There are some crops which need frosty weather at a certain period of their growth, because although the growing tips might be cut back, the roots are driven down and ultimately the plant is all the stronger for the set-back. Then is the time when we particularly walk by faith and not by sight. We go on in the faith that although it might not now be apparent, things will turn out all right and to our benefit.

We must be patient with our Church - the whole body of Christians in general, and our own congregation in particular. For after all, the Church is simply made up of people like ourselves, and if we are not quite perfect yet, we cannot expect them to be either. So mistakes will be made: at "top level" and at local level. To break away and refuse to join in worship is to give way to our impatience with people who do not see things our way or who will not co-operate with us, even though we know best. The whole division of Christendom into the various denominations was caused by this very thing! But praise be to God, the major denominations are meeting together and working together and at times worshipping together. There is by no means complete agreement in all the things which divide the Church, but there is a greater and growing

recognition of the things which we hold in common, and which have been overlooked as we worried about our differences of opinion and expression.

And in the local congregation we must recognise and accept the fact that every person is an individual, individually called by God, and individually responding, to a greater or lesser extent, to that call. The amount of response of another child of God is not our business. We might regret that the response is not more evident - but our responsibility is to ensure that the seed which is the word of God is planted, and that the conditions under which the seed might grow are the best we can provide. In other words, the local Christian community must be loving and accepting and forgiving, if necessary, so that the young Christian, of whatever age in terms of years, may be able to mature and bring forth in due time, all the fruits of the Spirit. We need to be aware of the danger of a thoughtless word or even gesture, which might frost off the tender plant to the extent that it dies. Sadly we must recognise that that does happen now and then - not often by deliberate intention, but mostly by lack of care, love, concern.

Similarly we must be patient with our community, especially when it is so self-centred and lacking in the basic knowledge of the love of God for all mankind. It is no good nagging, or preaching, or being "holier than thou". We must show them that we know a better way, that we know a meaning behind life, that we have an objective in life. It has been well said that you cannot talk people into the kingdom of God, only love them into it. People have to come to see and want it for themselves, that peace of God which passes human understanding - and we can only have that ourselves as we surrender ourselves to God and allow Him to occupy the centre of our being.

So we are back to ourselves and our relationship with God, needing patience and trust in God's providence, walking often by faith rather than by sight. "The kingdom of God", said Jesus, "is like a mustard seed the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs". As that seed is planted in us, in our Church, in our congregation, and in the community at large, we must nurture it and play our full part in assisting its growth and fruition. **AMEN**

"Jesus said to them: 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'"

From this morning's Gospel passage which we have just heard. (Mark 4:40) Of course they were afraid - a number of the disciples were fishermen, working on this very lake, the Sea of Galilee, and they had experienced such storms before. It would seem that these storms were to be feared, because they blew up very quickly, sweeping down from the gullies onto the Lake without much warning.

On this occasion Jesus had had a very heavy day, and was in a state of great fatigue. We may be sure that His works of healing required a great deal of spiritual power which made a heavy drain on His reserves of energy. Apart from energy needed for healing, preaching for a long time, followed by conversations with people who often had sad stories to tell or difficult questions to ask, must have been very tiring.

The story is recounted by each of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But it is only Mark who includes the detail that, because of the huge crowd gathered to hear Him, Jesus preached to them from a boat just off the shore. At the end of the day, when Jesus decided to cross to the other side, the disciples simply set sail. The other recorders both say that Jesus got into a boat to go to the other side, not mentioning that He had used the boat as a pulpit. Not that that matters much. All agree that Jesus went to sleep and had to be awakened when the storm struck. And this, as a point of interest, is the only place in the Gospels where we read of Jesus sleeping.

The storm must have been of unusual violence: "The waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped." Panic gripped even the experienced fishermen, who knew just what the weather could do out there on the Lake. So they woke Jesus: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He stilled the storm; the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. And He said to the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Did you notice the word used to describe how Jesus calmed the storm? He rebuked it - and the same word is used in each of the three accounts. Most translations of the New Testament agree on the use of this word also. It is almost as if the word was used to furnish a parallel between what Jesus did to the wind and the waves, and what He said to His disciples. They had disappointed Him by their lack of trust in the power of His presence. He rebuked them for their lack of faith: "Have you still no faith?"

How did He do it? We cannot know or explain the power of Jesus over the things of this world. Except to say that with God all things are possible, and that Jesus is God Incarnate. But this is not always a satisfactory explanation for people of a literal, materialistic outlook. We will miss the point of the incident by worrying too much about this aspect - the men in the boat did not, apparently, seek for an explanation. It had happened, and at the command of their companion. But they were filled with great awe and said to one another: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

It's a question we might all ask. Unfortunately not enough of us marvel. If more people marvelled, and considered what manner of man this is, then far fewer people would be fearful of the threats and worries of this world. At another time, Jesus said: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) And that was just prior to His arrest on Maundy Thursday night. But do we really go along with this?

Not everyone marvelled or were awestruck by what Jesus did. The very next incident, again recorded in each of the first three Gospels, makes that clear. When they crossed the Sea of Galilee, they found a very disturbed man who had to be kept chained up in case he injured himself, and others. Jesus healed him by ordering the demons which possessed him to leave him and go into a herd of swine - unclean animals to the

Jews of course. The pigs rushed down the hillside into the water and were drowned. The local inhabitants were not so much impressed by the healing of the demented man as upset by the loss of their pigs. They begged Jesus to leave their neighbourhood.

And it's much the same today. Instead of seeing the miracles which have been wrought by God, and are still being wrought, often through His Church, they see only the cost involved. For the Christian life is costly. Not just financially which is obvious, but in terms of service to other people, and time to be set aside for God and His work, and self-discipline in the manner of living. The Church is a discomfort to some people, because it troubles their

consciences and makes demands on their time, treasure, and talents, as well as their moral standards.

In every Parish and congregation there is a number of people who are prepared to sacrifice a great deal for the work of God, which is as it should be. After all they are only doing what a follower of Christ should be doing. Our Lord did say: "When you have done everything you were told to do, say: We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty." (Luke 17:10) From a faithful core of dedicated people an influence flows, far out of all proportion to the number involved. And this influence and example will affect others not so dedicated, and they will be helped to seek the source of stability and power discernible in the lives of the faithful core.

The miracle of the stilling of the storm contains at least four things to encourage us in our devotion and dedication.

We should remember our Lord's utter weariness, causing Him to sleep so deeply that the disciples had to awaken Him in the storm. Despite His weariness, and this would not have been the only time, He roused Himself to answer a call for help. When weariness holds us back from answering the call of duty, we can remember that Christ was tired but shook off that tiredness when it was necessary.

And then we might discern a note of impatience in the disciples' call for help: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" We can find this impatience with Jesus in other places too. For instance, Martha, who had sent a message to Jesus when her brother fell ill, said to Him on His arrival: "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Are there not times when we become impatient with God? When things go wrong either in the world or with ourselves, and there seems to be no response to our prayers and no help in our time of need, and we say: "Why doesn't God do something?" Like the disciples in the storm, we need more courage and more trust.

Our Lord's words calmed the excited, frightened disciples, as well as the storm. There are many times in our lives when we need calming. The storms of life may be raging around us. The inner storms of anger or jealousy or impatience or fear may be raging in our hearts. We must seek calm, inward peace - that peace of God which passes our understanding. This comes through prayer to Christ; through thoughts of Christ; through doing the will of Christ. In other words, through keeping near to Christ and putting our trust in Him. And this is the fourth point to be drawn: the disciples learnt from the incident on the lake that safety and deliverance lay in nearness to Christ and with trust in Him. In all the changing circumstances of life, we too may be sure of His help and care, if we keep near to Him and place our faith in Him.

"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" said Jesus to those who were with Him at the time, and to us who follow on after. Have faith in God and trust Him, and He will guide you through the storms of life to your destination. **AMEN**