

## *Sermon for Pentecost*

In a few moments we will say the creed. One member of the Trinity gets less attention than the other two. God the Father is

*the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen*

The Father creates, the Father is the source of all things. The Son is

*For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit  
and the Virgin Mary and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;*

And so on... The Father and the Son we know because we see creation and we the Son's life was revealed to us. God made manifest.. The Spirit is different. The creed continues,

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,*

There is a reason for that. If you read the *Catechism* of the Roman Catholic Church the reason is explained. I should tell you the *Catechism* is slightly longer than *War and Peace* and there are not as many battles, still if you do ever read the *Catechism* you will find that the Spirit *never speaks of itself*. That is an unusual virtue. A friend came to dinner the other night. He spoke of himself, at length. I have been known to speak of myself more than I should. It is very unusual to never speak of yourself, but that is what the Spirit does.

When I worked in a Cambridge College I had gone to bed before the boat club dinner ended. The following morning I could not see the boat club, but I always knew where it had been. That is one of the reasons we say the Spirit is a bit like the wind: you can't see the wind, but you can see the umbrella turned inside out. Which is why Jesus said:

*This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. John 14:17*

And, that is what we are supposed to be talking about this morning, something the world can't receive, or know, or see. If you have ever found the Holy Spirit a little tricky to describe, you can forgive yourself, you are meant to remember that we do not see or know the Spirit.

So, let's start again... Thirty years ago, at that Cambridge college, I met a first year student, called Duncan, who was not going to live long. We had conversations that stay with me.

We did not talk about faith or the *Catechism* of the Roman Catholic Church. He had had a bad experience of priests, he had no faith. Duncan was reading English, we used to talk about poems a fair bit.

He loved a poem which I did not know. It is called *Snow*, and it is by Louis MacNeice.

Now, MacNeice was not the sort of poet who wafted through banks of daffodils. He had a disastrous love life, smoked too much, and drank even more; his life was a racket. That was awkward, because his father was such a serious protestant minister that they made him a bishop. One grey day in his father's dour house, in Northern Ireland, Louis MacNeice looked out of the window. There was a big bunch of pink roses on the windowsill and beyond the window there was a snow storm. It was chaotic, a bit mad, the unexpected intruding on sullen routine, or as MacNeice put it,

*World is crazier and more of it than we think*

Snow, pink roses, some of this, some of that and more besides. *World is crazier and more of it than we think*

Now, this morning, we are doing a number of different things. I am talking and I am rather hoping that some of you are listening. Vergers are twiddling knobs in the cubby-hole so that you can hear me and wondering when they can turn me off. A choir sings, an organist plays and so on. There are many roles, but on activity. On a Tuesday morning though, it will be even more various. Choristers might be practicing Stanford in C somewhere over there, while there you might have a verger polishing his aspergillum (you can look that up later), over there you might meet a slightly over-emphatic young man who has ingested something and wants to persuade you that he is the indeed Son of God. Down there are two earnest tourists who might discuss the difference between an arch and an ambo. Up there the organist could be practicing a particular phrase from Messiaen for the fourteenth time and here in front of you is someone in floods of tears because their mother is in an operating theatre at the BRI.

*World is crazier and more of it than we think*

And, the point is, that you tidy that up at your peril, because much of it is the work of the Spirit. When the boat club passes in the night they leave behind one thing, disorder. Where the Spirit has been what you get is abundance and variety, but not chaos. God loves abundance.

*World is crazier and more of it than we think*

Read Genesis and you will find that it is the Spirit that gave us abundance. Genesis starts with a formless deep, the surge of the sea and the Spirit brings out of the deep this, which is different from that, and then something else. In Eddie Izzard's *Glorious* routine there is a moment when God rushes about creation at the last moment creating all the things he has nearly forgotten:

*Rwanda, football hooligans, the leaning tower of Pisa, toilets on French camp sites*

It's the sheer abundance of creation you are supposed to notice, and it is the Spirit that *does* that. It is the Spirit that has the apostles speaking in all those different tongues at Pentecost.

More than that, the Spirit is what helps us to cope with all this diversity, because the same Spirit holds it all together. The same Spirit breathes in the tourist and the choristers and the verger and even in the over emphatic young man (though he will struggle to know it). The Spirit gives us abundance and it gives us the community that can hold that abundance.

In fact, the creed says more about the Spirit than you first realise, because the Spirit is what lives and breathes in the community.

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins*

It is the Spirit that breathes in the church, holds together the communion of saints and reconciles us to the sinner. The Spirit may not speak of itself, but it speaks in the church and in forgiveness, in you and in me.

Why does that matter? Well, it matters because I think we have been very mealy mouthed about variety. The fact that we seemed to find Meghan Markle surprising suggests that we are still struggling with diversity. We belong to a church that for years and years has had evangelical ministers with an experience of conversion and catholic priest smelling faintly of gin and liberal vicars with more questions than answers and now, suddenly, all have them have to be on message. They all have to be the same. Schools and dioceses have straplines – *together aiming high* or, *we believe we will achieve*. I used to have a motto on my school blazer but it was in Latin and I never knew what it meant and no one ever told me. I am not convinced we need to be quite so focussed on a single ambition.

The point about life in the Spirit is that it is rich and abundant and we should learn to enjoy that. Life and religion, religion especially, too quickly becomes just this and never that. C S Lewis wrote imaginary letters from a senior devil to a junior devil and describes a ghastly woman who is offered delicacies to eat and instantly protests

*Oh please, please...all I want is a cup of tea, weak but not too weak, and the teeniest weeniest bit of really crisp toast”.*

And C S Lewis nails that woman as a sinner, as a glutton because, she is a slave to appetite. It is the word *all* in *All I want is a cup of tea*. Do you see, there is *one* thing she wants and nothing else in the glorious, crazy abundance of creation will do. She turns the goodness of God into something tiny she can control and possess. It is not pious to turn yourself into a project and determine to be just one thing. God does not have a mission statement. On the seventh day God rested and he observed that *all* things were good.

In Acts this morning we were told the disciples made a mighty discordant racket, but the crowd heard something else,

*how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes Acts 2:8-10*

To quote another poem, Mary Oliver imagines:

*when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse  
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;*

and she goes on

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it is over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.*

That is what I am talking about, and it is the gift of the Spirit.

The great challenge is not that we should all end up the same, the challenge is that we should be different and enjoy it, different and interested, different and working away at a language to hold and celebrate all that difference. This day, the day of the Spirit, is the day that we celebrate the fact that God gives us variety, gives us this extraordinary city, *and* gives us the gifts the imagination, the language to make us into a community. In the Spirit we can forgive, explain, argue and be reconciled, we can co-operate, sympathise and love. This Whitsunday is the day of variety. This is the day of diversity. And it is that very diversity that this is the day to see where the Spirit has been.