

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

**Pentecost, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2007**

Acts 2.1-21; John 14.8-17

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. *You know him*, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (John 14.16f.)

I hope you'll forgive me for being a little bit confessional this morning. You see, I've for a long time been rather worried by the verses I've just quoted to you – especially the words, 'You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.'

Those words make it sound as though it is absolutely obvious to Jesus' disciples that the Holy Spirit is with them in some almost tangible way. As though there must be incontrovertible signs of his presence in Christian lives, distinctive experiences which non-believers simply didn't have. It sounds as though the situation should never arise in which Christians are rather vague about the Holy Spirit, as many have been in the history of the Church. It sounds as though all Christians should be able to answer in confident tones, 'O, yes – certainly – here's the proof, when someone asks them 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'. (That was the question Paul asked of some converts who had received John the Baptist's Baptism, but not Christian Baptism. They were subsequently re-baptised 'in the name of the Lord Jesus,' Paul laid hands upon them, and promptly 'the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied'. (Acts 19.6))

This is the nub of the problem: there seems so much evidence that the early Christians expected to *experience* something when the Holy Spirit became part of their lives.

And yet some of you, like me, were probably told before you were confirmed, 'Don't expect to experience anything.' And you didn't – and I didn't: or nothing in the way of speaking in tongues, or prophesying, or wind, or fire – or even, particularly, a warm inner glow.

Which may leave some of you – like me - not quite sure how to be confident when you hear Jesus' words, '*You know him*, because he abides in you, and he will be with you.' *Do I know him? How would I recognise him?*

Now it may be that some of you are thoroughly relieved that you haven't had the kind of experience the disciples did at the first Pentecost; or the kind of experience that you associate with what you may be tempted to call 'Happy Clappy' churches, where people shout out, and sing in tongues, and fall on the floor in a spiritual trance. Some of you may be very content to believe in the Holy Spirit coming to you, almost imperceptibly, through the sacraments; strengthening you quietly and inwardly (you trust) to bear his fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And, indeed, I think we can have faith in the promise of Jesus and the teaching of the church, that this quiet operation of the Spirit is real, and has made a great difference in the world as Christ's followers are gradually transformed more and more into his image in moral terms.

We can also reflect that those disciples to whom Jesus was speaking, and saying 'you know him', were pre-resurrection disciples; the disciples who hadn't yet experienced the wind and fire of Pentecost. And there's no evidence that during the ministry of Jesus they'd been doing any of that shouting out, or speaking in tongues, or falling down in spiritual ecstasy.

They hadn't, as we might say now, been behaving like 'charismatics'. Except, that is, in one or two things: they'd begun, already, to carry Christ's power of healing with them, when they went out two by two (do you remember?) – and they'd been able to cast out evil spirits (or most of them) – if you think of that as a different gift from healing. So....something had been stirring...

Anyway– if you're not a very demonstrative person, and would be horrified to find yourself caught up in some fiery religious experience - there are certainly still grounds for saying that, 'yes' I do know the Holy Spirit. He is in me through faith.' Even if you find it a bit hard to put your finger on what his exact effects are in your life.

Because faith itself is the greatest evidence of his presence. We simply wouldn't believe in Christ in a personal and trusting way if the Spirit wasn't working in our hearts already. We *have* most definitely received the Spirit, whose role it is to make Christ known, if our faith in God is shaped and definitely marked as faith in Jesus.

But the other side of the coin is that, real though a quiet experience of the Spirit is – the Spirit known and trusted in the power of prayer and the effectiveness of the sacraments – nevertheless, there is always something more to what God can do with us. There are extraordinary things out there that can happen.

And this is where I return again to my confessional story: I'm one of those who *haven't* been content with an almost imperceptible knowledge of the Spirit. I was one who was disappointed when the school chaplain said in confirmation class, 'don't expect to experience anything'. I am one of those people – and perhaps some of you are, too - who tend to want the assurance of God's work in my life in something perceptible. I've spent many years being rather envious of Christians who have testimonies to give of the Spirit's power at work in their lives – perhaps in experiences within themselves, perhaps in stories of prayer startlingly answered, perhaps in the reception of supernatural gifts such as prophesy or speaking in tongues. I do believe in all these gifts. I grew into adulthood faith during the seventies, when the 'charismatic movement', as it was called, was sweeping the churches and bringing times of excitement and refreshing. I wanted to be part of that excitement.

I did – and yet I didn't. I was also rather afraid of it. Afraid of emotional manipulation or mass hysteria – certainly. But also, perhaps, afraid of God getting too close and asking too much of me – the living Lord taking things beyond my control. And afraid that it would turn out that I had to become some kind of tub-thumping fundamentalist before I could have the full 'Spirit experience'. And becoming a paid-up fundamentalist was something I just couldn't do.

I wonder if there are people here who can identify with any part of that story?

It seems to me now, some time down the line, and still wrestling a bit with these things, that there are two, opposite ways in which we can block the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our church. One way of blocking his work is to tell him – implicitly

perhaps – that he can't do this, that or the other – or not with *us* at least, not with *our* church. We wouldn't like it. We don't want to be changed, or to be shaken up. That's a pretty firm blockage to put in his way. (Though God the Holy Spirit is quite capable of blowing-up even the most solid of road blocks when he chooses.)

But the other blockage we may put in his way is to be too definite about what he's got to do before we'll believe he's really working. Some people say that if you don't speak in tongues for example, you don't really know him. If your church doesn't offer times of informal 'ministry' and laying-on of hands at the end of every service, then it's not really a Spirit-led church.

Well, as I've said already, that's really nonsense. Because if we believe and trust in Jesus at all, it can only be through the Holy Spirit. But the key word in all this is *trust*. Because trust implies love. The love that casts out all fear (as St John puts it, in his first Epistle). The love that wants God to be God, yet is certain that he also wants us to be most fully and freely ourselves, as he made us to be. Not suddenly constrained to become other than we are (except for sin), or to behave in ways that go entirely against the grain of our being. But fully ourselves in ways that go *beyond* what we know of ourselves now – and yet are in harmony with our best selves as we're discovering those best selves in him.

If we trust in the Lord and his Spirit like that, we can be like those early disciples, meeting together in the Upper Room and just waiting – waiting for what he chooses to give us, what he chooses to do with us. We can be before him in prayer with open hands and open hearts – neither prescribing nor proscribing the action of the Spirit. Just saying, rather, 'Here I am Lord, - here your church is, Lord, in this place. Come to us, come to me, in exactly the way you choose, and use us, use me in exactly the way that you choose.'

That kind of openness is the sign of real faith, real trust – because it expresses the love of God in our hearts.

A faith that is growing into openness and trust like that is the surest sign of the Spirit alive in us – whether we're thinking of ourselves as a church or as individuals.

Who knows what may happen, whether sudden or gradual, dramatic or quiet if we can pray our prayers, sing our hymns – say the words 'Come Holy Spirit' - with openness, love and trust like that?

In the end, we shouldn't be seeking experiences. It's what the old spiritual wisdom describes as seeking 'consolations' for their own sake. But on the other hand, no more should we be seeking the 'quiet life', the uneventful life, the predictable life, spiritually speaking. In the end, what we should seek is simply God himself, for his own sake – and for the sake of the world, in which he set us to be his servants and agents of love.

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*'Come Holy Spirit, to the hearts of your faithful people; and kindle in us the fire of your love.'*