Some ask for the world
and are diminished
in the receiving
of it. You gave me
only this small pool
that the more I drink
from, the more overflows
me with sourceless light.

The words of RS Thomas’ poem *Gift* give us a lens through which to view both our readings this morning, and this feast Pentecost that we celebrate today. The coming of the Holy Spirit marked a new and dramatic season for the early church. We tend to think of this event in ways that are characterised by noise and colour: a great celebration akin to the scenes witnessed yesterday during the Royal Wedding. But even in that most wonderful of celebrations, there was a stillness, a mystery and the beauty of love, a moment when time stood still and we all got a sense of the mystery that surrounds us.

When Sir Peter Maxwell Davies composed his 8th symphony entitled *The Antarctic Symphony* he travelled to that vast icy continent and noted an ‘extraordinary sound experience…) a gentle avalanche of snow from cliffs towering high on either side of the narrow channel through which the ship was passing – the chilling powder enveloped us all on the deck, with a whisper and hiss that paradoxically seemed to be more profoundly quiet than the previous silence; no-one could speak for minutes afterwards.’ It was this experience among others that in his words ‘determined there and then that I use a Pentecost plainsong, associated with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, in this palpably most un-Christian symphony.’ Less noise, more silence.
Any reflection on gifts and giftedness is entirely appropriate in a University setting such as this. Universities in many ways both thrive and survive on gifts: gifts of financial endowment, gifts of intellect and wisdom, gifts of achievement and success (albeit hard-earned; I have met very few people who haven’t described academic work as easy). But those gifts can be a burden too. I speak from this Cathedral pulpit located in a place of power, privilege, and immense wealth; a world away from the people and places I encounter in the Yorkshire Dales on a daily basis.

It has been a long and hard winter for farmers. The ‘chocolate-box’ exteriors of rural villages belie the experience of anxiety and poverty, the lack of affordable housing, the challenge of small schools and even in places the lack of connectedness through poor broadband coverage. It is what you do with wealth that matters, and uniquely being both College and Cathedral this building and its witness stands for more than just riches and privilege, and thank God for that!

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul provides a summary of the spiritual gifts, a kind of shopping list of what is available. When you read it you have to wonder about its ordering. It has the potential for chaos. Nicholas King asks, in the context of these verses:

‘how do you prioritise the gifts, and how do you prevent the Christian liturgy from becoming a zoo, if all these gifts are on offer?’

Certainly if Isaiah is anything to go by, with a wolf living with a lamb, a leopard lying down with a kid, and a calf, lion and falling together all being led by a little child, this is a very interesting zoo indeed! But nature of course with all its rawness, hardship and violence, can also be a wise and gentle teacher. Both our readings show capacity for human beings to dream of a better world, one in which both the work restoration and the proclamation of hope are abiding principles to govern how we live.

Paul’s response to potential liturgical confusion is to return to the Spirit, the source of all gifts and the driver of unity in the Christian Church. This is the same Spirit that Isaiah speaks of: the Spirit that can sustain and enliven in the most desperate of circumstances, a people in exile. But it is also a warning that both the Spirit and the gifts it provides often come from the most unlikeliest of places, and in the most surprising of circumstances.

It’s easy sometimes to see church as yet another consumerist activity; we can (in theory at least) choose where to go; we can offer various services, gatherings, Bible study groups, and whatever else we can think of. We can also choose to leave and branch out on our
own in the belief that that will be better, but Christ’s body is wounded in fragmentation. The list on offer can be endless, and there is pressure on churches to market themselves, and find creative ways of using space to appeal to the apparent ’popular market’.

But the danger is that in all of this, we forget not just who we are but whose we are. The drive to consumerism even when it promises to help a worthy cause is, as a friend pointed out to me recently, really just about buying more stuff; it doesn’t save the planet or remove global poverty!

We are the Body of Christ and in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body, so writes Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. In the drama of Acts, at the time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Paul had yet to realise that we know those words and yet so often we forget them. Not just who we are, but whose we are. Innovation, by all means, but introspective navel gazing by all means not! When we remember whose we are, then we can respond in humility and not arrogance.

Through the Holy Spirit, by proclaiming the Gospel, we still attend to the words of Jesus; in the church and in the world, we still attend to the acts of Jesus in his body. We attend to the word of God that calls upon us still; but to do any of that effectively, we need to be able to notice the things that surround us, and to do that, we also need to slow down sometimes...and that...is not easy.

For all its exuberance and obvious energy, the Holy Spirit isn’t about a trolley dash through the aisles, it’s about attending to the still small voice, and noticing the signs on the road. Too often the church becomes fixed on its own glory and ignores the profound reality that following Jesus was not, is not, and never shall be about power and glory; quite the opposite.

Last week, I visited one of the church schools in the Anglican Diocese of Leeds. I met a young woman who is taking her GCSEs. I listened into a conversation she was having with a career’s advisor about a work placement that she wants to do after her exams are over: at a local radio station. She will have responsibility for producing her own programme, and she was very excited at the prospect this would offer her of enlivening and growing her gifts in the world of media studies. The fact that she is confined to a wheelchair following a freak accident as a 5 year-old would not prevent her from fulfilling her dreams. I was deeply humbled by my encounter with her, by her positivity and joy in a life that some would no doubt find unbearable and without hope.
Our lives are far more about navigating our way through mist than they are about enjoying the views from the top of the mountain. Whereas other revelations of God take place at height, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes in a down-to-earth level place where the followers of Jesus were gathered together. 'I sought to hear the voice of God and climbed the topmost steeple' (so writes John Henry Newman), 'but God declared: Go down again - I dwell among the people.' God became one of us, dwelt among us, died on the cross for us, and rose again. We don't spend all our days on mountain tops, we need to come down and when we do, we might indeed discover that the small pools from which we sometimes drink offer us the overflowing and sourceless light of God’s wisdom, grace and mercy.

*Amen.*