

Christ Church Online Sermon for Pentecost

31 May 2020 *Rom. 8:22–27*

Come, Holy Spirit, what we know not, teach us; what we have not, give us; what we are not, make us; for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

First-fruits.

Promise.

Now but not yet.

On this Pentecost Sunday as we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the first disciples and poured out on us in our baptisms into Christ's death and resurrection, I want to focus our attention on that incompleteness.

In talking to people about our world at the moment, one of the most common questions I hear is, 'How can you believe in God in the face of all this?' Whether it's the virus itself or the failure and neglect that has led to so many deaths in our care homes or the actions and lockdown restraints that have led to such an increase in domestic violence and mental health problems, some people cannot understand how there

could be any God. And yet for me these same tragedies have thrown God's presence more starkly into relief as I've seen him at work in the loving care people offer to strangers at risk of their own health, in the generosity and compassion that have put others first in food banks and phone support and street champions.

Some people seem to feel that to believe in God everything would have to be perfect, all answers sorted, all problems resolved. But that is never the picture our tradition or Scriptures give us. The jigsaw of faith isn't finished but we've been given the corners, an edge and a spot of blue. Scripture offers words like those we heard just now from St Paul to the Romans. Words that tell of groaning, of the pains of child-birth, of something beginning but not yet come to be. (Rom. 8:22)

For what we have now Paul tells us is just the first-fruits – in Greek the *aparche* – of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23). It's the first hint of light at the sunrise, the scent of bread beginning to bake in the oven, the first fruit ripening on the tree. God is not done but the signs of what he is doing are all around.

Creation groans and we groan with it and O, how we know our world groans under the weight climate change, environmental disaster and spreading disease! But this is no mere lament, no simple yell of frustration. It is hope. Hope of a promise. 'For in this hope, we are saved' and 'hope that is seen is no hope at all – who hopes for what they already have?' (Rom. 8:24)

The Spirit, Paul tells us, is precisely God helping us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26). God alongside us as the first-fruits, the promise, the hope of a fuller union that is yet to be. God calling us on and up and out.

In this *aparche* of the Spirit, God himself intercedes for us through 'sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8:26). That is a striking image all too easy to skip over. Paul tells us that it is not just us crying out, not just the creation around us but God himself within us. God reaches out to God and catches us up in that movement.

In the heart of God as Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit pour out the whole of their being into one another in an eternal giving of gift. And here on earth, an earth on which God walked

incarnate as Christ, we are swept up into that dynamic of life by the Spirit with us, the Spirit groaning for us, the Spirit interceding on our behalf.

We are not there yet. The union is not complete. The Kingdom has not fully come. But there are grounds of hope, hints of promise. The great Russian theologian Pavel Florensky spent many years wondering why the Spirit is so hard to draw, define, describe – compared with the Father and the Son, his presence often seems more mysterious, his features more difficult to discern. A theological conundrum that many are tempted to resolve by reducing the Spirit to a force, a power, something less than the other persons of the Trinity. But that way lies deep doctrinal danger and Florensky suggests that the elusiveness of the Spirit in both the Scriptures and our lives hinges upon this now but not yet, that we are betrothed but not yet married, sharers in the first-fruits but not yet the harvest.

As we wrestle and wait and pray, let us give thanks for those first-fruits of the Spirit, the little shoots of the Kingdom and the promise of more to come. Pentecost is powerful but it's incomplete. It's not what we know, what we have or what we

do that saves us but what we hope. Our calling is a journey,
a movement.

So where is God in this crisis? He is in our midst, calling us
on, lifting us up, showing us hope.

In our incompleteness, let us pray now with our Choir, in a
setting by Howard Goodall, 'Come, Holy Spirit. Veni, Sancte
Spiritus.'

*Come, Holy Spirit, and send down from heaven
the ray of your light.*

*Come, father of the poor, come, giver of gifts,
come, light of hearts.*

*Best consoler, sweet host of souls,
sweet refresher.*

Rest in work, cooling in heat, comfort in crying.

O most blessed Light,

fill the innermost hearts of your faithful.

*Without your power nothing is in humanity,
nothing is innocent.*

Grant us the reward of virtue,

grant us final salvation,

grant us eternal joy.

Alleluia. Amen.