

Pentecost is a Jewish festival, fifty days after Passover. It celebrates the giving of the Law by Moses, and for Christians it celebrates a renewal of that law: not in its empty and outdated formalities, but in its essence. Jesus tells us to love God and our neighbour, for ‘on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets’. Moreover, the Jewish law was taken to apply only to the Children of Israel, but now, in his ecstatic speech from today’s reading, Peter announces that God declares ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.’

The Holy Spirit had not, of course, been hiding away before Pentecost. Arguably it appears in the very first verse of the Bible. What was new was its outpouring on the disciples and on those who were with them. In today’s Gospel Jesus says he will send it after he has gone, when they can no longer rely on his guidance. He calls it the *paraklétos*, Paraclete, and that word has been translated in different ways: we had ‘Comforter’ in Chapel last Sunday evening, and ‘Advocate’ and ‘Counsellor’ today. These may all be right in their way, but they certainly seem different. What *is* the Holy Spirit?

Jesus calls it the Spirit of Truth and Love. It is, of course, the third person of the Trinity. The concept is at least closely related to the Hebrew ‘Shekinah’, God’s abiding presence on earth. It is God in his constant endeavour to spread truth and love in his creation. God is often described as abiding and unchanging, and that can make Him seem very distant. But the Holy Spirit is God’s way of acting in the world. There is something very personal about it, for it is characteristic of people to have aims, and to try to achieve things. So the Holy Spirit tries to spread the message of Jesus in the world and throughout the world. Not necessarily to spread religious doctrine – that may be helpful in some times and places and not in others. But to spread Jesus’ message that it is love that matters, for on this hangs all the Law and the Prophets. ‘Love’ here of course translates the New Testament word *agapé*, which carries less of a connotation of emotion than our word does. What matters is not what you feel, but what you do; though of course what you feel may play a part in determining your action.

The Holy Spirit tries. To try is to open oneself to the possibility of failure. And indeed the Holy Spirit has failed again and again, and continues to do so. There have been great successes too, of course. But sadly, throughout history many Christians have been far from loving, and the same is true today. The different branches of the Church cannot abstain from quarrelling with one another, and denouncing one another, often on matters which are far from central to Jesus’ message. The present disputes about gender and sexuality are an example, but they are mild compared with some of the conflicts of the past; one Pope was publicly flogged and left to starve by Christians who disagreed with him. A particularly long-lasting conflict has concerned the Holy Spirit itself. After years of angry argument the Eastern and Western Churches split in 1054, largely on the question of whether the Holy Ghost proceeded from the Father and the Son or only from the Father. This dispute has been partially patched up recently, but it generated much misery; it was a factor in the fall of Constantinople in 1453. On either side, not one person in a hundred thousand has understood what was at issue.

If the Holy Spirit is God, one may ask, how can it fail? But the answer is straightforward. We are not under God’s control. If we were, nothing that we did could ever have moral worth, for it would not really be our own action. God is dependent on us to work his purpose out. We may be confident that in the long run He will succeed, but how long a run that may be depends on us, and things are not going well. The Holy Spirit speaks to all of us, through

Scripture, through reason, and through our own awareness of what we should and should not do. Sometimes we respond. Very often we do not. But without the Holy Spirit to guide us we should be lost in the wilderness.

The word *paraklétos*, Paraclete, could certainly be translated ‘Advocate’, but ‘Helper and Counsellor’ would be at least as close to the root meaning of the Greek: someone on whom we can call to help us, and who tries to guide us in the right way. Listening to that voice can be difficult, amidst all the rush and the pressures of everyday life; and managing to act on it can be even more difficult. We are weak, and without God’s help we can only stumble blindly. But the message of Pentecost is that God is here with us, to enlighten our blindness, and to help us overcome our manifold weaknesses.

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire.