

*Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on Pentecost (Sunday 8 June) 2014, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

I've told a few of you already about a religious experience I had in my first year as an undergraduate. Properly speaking, about a religious experience I did not have.

To put it in context, you need to know about the church I grew up in. It was Anglican, actually a quite extreme Anglo-Catholic church. It wasn't extreme to me, of course; I didn't know there was any other kind of church. One of my early childhood memories is of being taught by my older brother how to genuflect – to go down on one knee before the tabernacle on the altar – when I was about to be a server for the first time. It was my first assignment as Boat Boy, carrying the small metal container known as a boat, holding the unlit incense, walking alongside the Thurifer, who had responsibility for coals and tongs and fire, and the thurible itself. The Thurifer was a person of immense seniority, often as old as fifteen or sixteen. I only had to know *how* to genuflect; I didn't have to know *when*. When you were Boat Boy, the Thurifer took care of that. He directed all your movements, steering you around the sanctuary with a firm grip on your lower neck and collar-bone, as you walked side by side. From time to time, you would feel the iron hand of the Thurifer push your shoulder in the direction of the floor: that's how you knew when to genuflect. As the years went by, I worked my way up through the ranks: Boat Boy to Torchbearer, Torchbearer to Credence, then Second Server, First Server, and finally the most enviable job of all: I myself became a Thurifer. But soon it was time to go off to college – in a place where there was, unluckily for me, not much call for a server with my advanced skills.

Looking for Christian fellowship all the same, I found it. In a totally different form. It had nothing to do with a church building of any kind. These were vibrant and lively prayer gatherings in a secular meeting-room in the campus centre, plastic chairs grouped around in a circle. Instead of hymns and choir and organ, there was a guitar or two, and praise songs. Towards the end of some of the meetings when the whole group prayed, there was something strange going on, a low murmur here and there of what sounded like babble, people speaking different languages perhaps; but the languages weren't the sort you would recognise. They were praying in tongues: this was my introduction to charismatic Christianity. The whole feel of the meetings was warm and friendly and there was lots of kindness, people quick to smile, to look each other in the eye, to laugh at each other's jokes, to join hands in prayer. They wouldn't have thought it right to endorse the kind of church I had grown up in. Judging from what they said about their own church backgrounds, I felt pretty sure they would feel our church at home was missing the whole point of being Christian. There was a species of person referred to as 'so-called Christians,' and I guess that's how they would (with sadness) have had to characterise the people at our church. I was given to understand that there was a major element of Christian life which I had missed out on altogether. This was an experience they called the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. The way you knew you'd been baptized in the Holy Spirit was typically by praying in tongues, or at least by having an extremely powerful emotional experience at some particular identifiable time. You'd start crying for example, and God would properly fill you with the Spirit and equip you for the life and work of a Christian.

So I prayed. Having been raised as a believer, I had prayed all my life, but never for this. I so prayed for the gift of speaking in tongues, for that definitive deep experience that was the mark of a true Christian, the real deal. The fellowship group flew into action, trying to help. I'm sure they were keen to see it happen for me. I was given a prayer partner, who

met with me on Saturday mornings, and he would go zooming off praying in tongues – praying, I imagine, that this gift would be transmitted to me. But there I sat, addressing the Lord in nothing but English, meeting after meeting. I must have seemed a tough case, and I have to admit that deep within myself I came to see it wasn't going to work. In time, I did something completely countercultural for a student in that time and place. I began to make my own way quietly, early on Sunday mornings, into the village nearby. It took about half an hour; on a crisp morning in autumn it was a great walk. I found my way to the Episcopal church, my own denomination, and became a regular at the early morning service, almost always the only student present. When all was said and done, I liked these 'so-called Christians' – just as I liked the ones at home – and I believe God's Holy Spirit was strong in them too, as they lived out their unspectacular faith from week to week, year by year, quietly, for a lifetime. For me, it was worship that was personally resonant, a way of bringing myself into the presence of God that was authentic. I began to see it was okay that I couldn't point to a single watershed moment when I'd spoken in unknown tongues, or uttered words of prophecy. I could learn and accept that I was most true to God and myself in churches like the one I had grown up in, where the closest we ever got to someone being 'slain in the spirit' was a server keeling over because of the heat ... lying sprawled on the sanctuary carpet ... until he was picked up and tidied away by the Master of Ceremonies.

I began to see it was possible to be a Christian without having had one specific type of experience. I knew some of the most powerful apprehensions of the holiness of God that I had ever experienced were in promptings that would have been heard – as was the case for Elijah – in a still small voice, not a dramatic earthquake or fire. In a quiet moment kneeling in prayer. Through thoughtful consideration of scripture. Through the beauty of music and singing, however complicated, however simple. I was reminded that we can be filled with the Holy Spirit by a walk under the stars, through the grace of confession, through anointing for healing, sometimes by reading a totally non-religious poem or novel. It can happen in the highest of high liturgies, or in a revival meeting, or a muddy riverside baptism. In prayer between two friends in a sitting-room. In persistent devotion to the presence of Christ when we make our communion, Sunday after Sunday. I came to see that the way in which we receive the Holy Spirit is shaped and formed by the kind of person we are, and the particular direction God wants to take us.

That is an important part of the message, I believe, in the event we celebrate today, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles at Jerusalem. It's a reminder that we humans operate in an almost infinite multiplicity of idioms, dialects; and God's purpose is not to get rid of all that as a misfortune, but to make contact with us all, as only God can do. It's been observed that the tongues of fire which descended on the apostles at Pentecost were divided, 'cloven,' that the word used in Acts means 'tongues-being-divided,' and this affirms that our diverse experiences of the reality of God are to be expected. They are taken account of by the One who makes every human being a unique and un-repeatable individual. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says that the 'cloven tongues' of Pentecost show the gift of the Holy Spirit to be not only a gift to the Church but also 'a personal gift, appropriated by each in her or his own way,' and that 'life in the Church does not mean the ironing out of human variety, nor the imposition of a rigid and uniform pattern upon all alike, but the exact opposite.' He says 'It is not holiness but evil which is dull.'<sup>1</sup> If we are right in describing the work of the Holy Spirit as nothing less than the regeneration of humanity,<sup>2</sup> then it would be surprising if that

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church, new edition* (Penguin Books), pp, 242-43.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Meridian Books, Living Age edition), p. 3.

regeneration didn't happen in countless ways which we do not particularly understand or relate to, in ways we have never taken seriously, ways we have never thought of.

Reflecting on the Pentecost event in Acts, the poet W.H. Auden writes, 'The miracle wrought by the Holy Spirit is generally referred to as a gift of tongues: is it not equally a gift of ears? It is just as miraculous that those in the parts of Libya about Cyrene and strangers from Rome should be able to listen to Galileans, as that Galileans should be able to speak to them. The curse of Babel is not the diversity of human tongues – diversity is essential to life – but the pride of each of us which makes us think that those who make different verbal noises from our own are incapable of human speech so discourse with them is out of the question.'<sup>3</sup>

Apply that perspective to the way we relate to other Christians, and for that matter to those of other faiths, and the nature of our aspirations and prayers may change. We may find ourselves praying not to have just what they have, or vice versa, but for ears to hear and take in their very different experiences of encounter with God. Not making our experience the measure of theirs, nor theirs the measure of ours, but remembering the obvious. That the Gifts of the Spirit, and God's grace, are always bigger than we think.

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<sup>3</sup> See Auden's introduction to Anne Fremantle's *The Protestant Mystics* (1964), reprinted in Auden's *Forewords and Afterwords*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Vintage Books), p. 78.