

Pentecost

This week's offering comes with a music recommendation; if you have access to it take the time to listen to the traditional hymn – Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, sometimes titled 'Veni Creator Spiritus' – there are a lot on You Tube if you want to look it up. I have also included the words below for you to think about and perhaps sing-a-long to.

Here we are 49 days after Easter celebrating the festival of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is one of the great feasts. Back a couple or three generations the British tradition of the 'Whitsunday Walk' was a great favourite. People would buy new clothes for the occasion and there would be parades, bands and a lot of community spirit. It's one of the sad losses of our more secular society.

But why 49/50 days? And why the apparent discrepancy between John's version of the gift of the Spirit and Luke's version in Acts?

As I keep saying to you, when you read the scriptures you need to have your brain turned on and ask the questions. There is a reason and it is down to the point that Luke and John were trying to make. We'll take John's point first.

As always with John there are layers and layers of meaning and information (Onion, Ogre, parfait remember) but today we are just looking at the surface. John wanted to make the point that the gift of the Spirit came directly through Jesus. It was only through belief in him and in his sacrifice, death and resurrection that you could receive God's gift of himself. He was also emphasising that the gift came with responsibility and a commission. The gift of the Spirit was not meant to be kept to yourself but to be taken out, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' and linked directly to the preaching of the Gospel. (That's the whole forgiving of sins thing)

Ultimately John is saying that it is only through Christ's repairing of the breach between God and his creation that we can receive God within us.

Luke's version in the Acts of the Apostles' announces the same gift but through a different route. Luke has other points that he wants to make.

I think I have mentioned more than once the significance of various numbers in Jewish theology. 1, 3 and 12 being very significant. 50 also has its own meaning which Luke weaves into his narrative.

Every 50 years, while the Children of Israel were resident in the land, there was declared to be a Jubilee year. Debts were written off and Jewish slaves were released. Also, 50 days after the Passover, there was the Jewish festival of the Shavuot (no idea how you pronounce that). The Passover was the celebration of freedom from slavery, the Shavuot a commitment to doing God's will.

Luke is putting all that together to emphasise the importance of the gift of the Spirit; the sense of rejoicing that a jubilee brings and, again, the obligation that comes with it. If Easter is the celebration of our being saved by God (which it is) then Pentecost is the willingness to use our freedom to God's glory.

To top it all off, it is God's Spirit within us that enables us to do all this.

The fruit of the Spirit is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It comes as a package deal and the more you rely on the Spirit the greater the gift becomes. It's like exercise – the more you do, the more you are able to do, you feel better and are healthier. Choosing to accept the Holy Spirit is exercise for the soul. It bolsters us against the darkness of the world, it heals our deepest hurts, and builds us up into ... well I was going to put some heroic picture here but have changed my mind, what the Spirit builds us up into is ... us! The people we were always meant to be, children of a loving God; brothers and sisters of Christ himself; shining, beautiful creations and, if you are fully, joyfully, yourself there is no greater champion of God's message.

So rejoice! Today is a jubilee. We give thanks for our freedom from sin and death, we are no longer slaves of our flaws and failures. We thank God for his Holy Spirit and the blessings that that brings us and we dedicate ourselves to helping others come to know those same blessings.

Hmmm – another hymn springs to mind and yes I have included the words for you as well.

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,
And lighten with celestial fire.
Thou the anointing Spirit art,
Who dost thy seven-fold gifts impart.

Thy blessed unction from above
Is comfort, life and fire of love.
Enable with perpetual light
The dullness of our blinded sight

Anoint and cheer our soiled face
With the abundance of thy grace
Keep far our foes, give peace at home:
Where thou art guide, no ill can come.

Teach us to know the Father, Son,
And thee, of both, to be but one.
That, through the sages all along,
This may be our endless song;

Praise to thy eternal merit,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We have a gospel to proclaim
Good news for men in all the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing His glory, tell His worth.

Tell of His birth at Bethlehem,
Not in a royal house or hall
But in a stable dark and dim:
The Word made flesh, a light for all.

Tell of His death at Calvary,
Hated by those He came to save;
In lonely suffering on the cross
For all He loved His life He gave.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
Empty the tomb, for He was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share His victory.

Tell of His reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified;
He sends His Spirit on His Church
To live for Him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name Him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing His glory, tell His worth.