

Pentecost – The Spirit blows where God wills

Today we might notice the emphasis given in the Scriptures to the universality of the gifts of the Spirit. They are received by *devout men from every nation under heaven* (1 Reading); ‘...*The same Lord is working in all sorts of different ways in different people. The same God is working in all of them...One Spirit is given to us all to drink* (2 Reading).

This teaching is consistent with our own experience – we know that a variety of people live lives of great integrity and courage with evident concern for the welfare of others. These can be people of different Christian denominations or different religious faiths. They can be people who have not recognised the presence of God in their life, or people who would even dispute the existence of God – or of God’s involvement in human affairs. Nonetheless, whatever their convictions may be such people can be rich in compassion, true to their word, and honest in their dealings. Their goodness can sometimes put us to shame.

We cannot fail to be aware of the many examples of non-Catholic Christians whose faith is deeper, whose hopes are larger, and whose charity is wider (more embracing) than our own. We surely know of men and women of other faiths who have greater strength in adversity, greater sensitivity to their fellow creatures, or greater awareness of the Divine Presence than we have.

We may well count among our friends or colleagues certain individuals who would not claim to have any religious belief as we understand it and yet remain people of great dignity and stature: true to themselves, straightforward with others, concerned for the well-being of each individual in society and for the community as a whole. Some such people devote their lives in works of service.

Clearly it would be absurd for us to claim a monopoly on the gifts of God, or to suggest that the Holy Spirit confines activity to the membership of the Catholic Church. All the evidence points to the **generosity** of God’s love and to how, far from limiting the operation of Divine grace to our own spiritual family, God’s love overflows, running into the lives of many.

Of course it is right for us to rejoice in our privileged position as receivers of God’s revelation. Like the race of Israel in the Old Testament the community of the Church has received special favours in her history: experiences of God’s Love, the guidance of God’s Truth. But such favours should not give us cause for arrogance or superiority – rather for humility and a greater sense of responsibility in communicating our knowledge of Divine goodness to others.

We must avoid falling into that attitude of mind or heart in which we consider anyone who is not of our faith as somehow a lesser person than we are. Sadly the Church has, in the course of her history, often made that mistake – as indeed did the Chosen People of the Old Testament. But the Spirit of God moves in every generation, blowing where God wills, to remind us of our common humanity, of our shared sinfulness, and of the promise of salvation that God offers to all persons without exception.

We should bitterly regret and leave behind those instances in which the church suppressed the discoveries or insights of science, burnt heretics at the stake, or sought to defend the Christian patrimony with pillage and slaughter.

We should also beware today, along with people of other Christian denominations or of other religious faiths, of nursing old grievances, abusing each other in word or deed, or denying each other equal opportunities in society.

The Spirit who is breathed from the Christ of the Gospel is a Spirit of forgiveness, of reconciliation. If we only open our hearts to one another we shall **know** that reconciliation. But if we keep the doors of our hearts closed *for fear* then our sins and their consequences shall surely *be retained*.

The Spirit who inspired the words of the Scriptures also inspired the words of the Ecumenical Council in our own time. In its decrees we are called to have a profound respect for men and women of good will whether or not they share our religious convictions (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 2, paragraphs 13-17).

The true Christian is not someone who distances himself from the Non-believer: rather we are called to associate with them, holding fast to our own principles of life and life, and by the example of our integrity and charity, win them for Christ in His Church. That is the teaching in essence of the document on inter-religious relations published by the Bishops Conference of England and Wales: *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*.

Today we should make our own the prayer of the Church expressed in the Gospel acclamation:

Come O Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful – kindle in them the fire of your love.

Or that of the congregations of the Old Testament who cried aloud the words of the psalmist:

Send forth your Spirit O Lord, and renew the face of the earth.