

Good Morning,

We have entered a period that has become widely recognised as 'Thy Kingdom Come'; 10 days between Ascension (when the church celebrates Jesus ascending up to heaven) and Pentecost (when the church celebrates the time that the Holy Spirit was sent to the Disciples to guide them in spreading the gospel and building the Church). During these 10 days, People from different kinds of churches and backgrounds are all praying that God would send His Holy Spirit to inspire, challenge and support so that the Church on earth may grow and every person may be able to discover the love of God.

It is amazing just how much 'Thy Kingdom Come' has grown since its introduction around 5 years ago. Initially just a Church of England initiative, it soon spread throughout the Anglican Church worldwide and into every denomination. This week, as we pray that the Spirit may come amongst us, we will be joined by other Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Methodist, United Reformed, Baptist and Free Church Christians the world over. As far as a tangible action is concerned, only the Holy Eucharist will be shared by more Christians at any one given time.

So why is this so important? Well, praying for the Spirit is an essential act of any Christian. And in praying for it, we must also be open to what it may bring. You see the world is not yet perfect. Indeed, the Church is not yet perfect, far from it. God's people are not yet united. As individuals we are a long way from perfection too. God did make us to be perfect, but its just that he hasn't finished with us yet.

The Theologian Chris Spurgeon reminds us that, 'though we may have changed a thousand times, God has not changed once'. When we speak about the Holy Spirit, we often think about it in terms of it stirring a community into change in the current time. But the Spirit also works through both scripture and church tradition because the Spirit was just as active in the past as it is today; so, there is a balancing act to be done.

The Holy Spirit also comes to each one of us personally, of course, and this can be the most uncomfortable of all. And the problem is, of course, if we fail to follow the Spirit's guidance then we can expect difficulties. Because the Spirit comes with wind and flame. The Holy Spirit may well comfort us, but what it calls us to is not always easy or comfortable for us.

Both of today's readings are prompts to us to reflect in different ways on what it is that God is calling us to be. The 1st letter of St Peter chapter 4, is certainly focussed upon formation of the individual. At its core, it asks the question; what does it mean to become most completely Christian? What does it mean to be a full and positive member of the Church, Christ's Body on Earth?

In his letter, Peter is encouraging us to reflect upon the sufferings we sometimes experience in life and the way in which they are associated with our Christian faith. He splits our sufferings into two simple categories: those that are a direct consequence of our faithfulness and those that are the result of our own misguided actions.

He says, 'if you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.' And then he moves on, 'but let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or a mischief maker'. To follow the Spirit's direction may not always be easy, indeed it might lead us into conflict with others, but when our suffering is based in our dedication to the Gospel, we are in that moment closer to God and the Spirit is with us. However, the suffering we inflict upon ourselves as a result of our own misjudged activity is a different kind of pain, and that requires a different kind of help through the Spirit in order to realign us to God: ultimately self-reflection and repentance.

Chapter 17 of John's Gospel helps us to reflect on all of this at a deeper level. As though we were entrusted with a divine kaleidoscope, this text draws us into the deep dialogue at the heart of the Holy Trinity. Jesus the Son, aware that his time of glorification is approaching, speaks to the Father on his follower's behalf. We are witnessing here the eternal conversation that continues in the heart of God; the Son petitioning the Father to keep all those who have come to know him safe in the truth and love of God. Jesus is not asking God to provide each believer with bodysuits made of bubble-wrap to ensure their physical safety, he is asking God to provide them with a supernatural force that can protect their spiritual wellbeing. In other words, he is asking that the Holy Spirit may keep them on the right path once he is taken up to into glory.

Rather Characteristically, in this text from John we see that corporate unity has a bearing on each individual's spiritual health. He isn't saying that every Christian community must look or act in exactly the same ways. Elsewhere in the New Testament we see that 'style', if you want to call it that, will be partly determined by local custom and those individuals God places in the community to lead and

teach them. In asking the Father for his followers to be 'one, as we are one', he is speaking of a unity that is found in the core of our Christian belief. A unity that is drawn through that very oneness that we see in the Divine Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In many ways, we see something of this unity developing through 'Thy Kingdom Come' in the way it has united many different traditions of Christianity in the simple act (according to their own custom) of praying for the very Spirit that itself will make us one.

But 'Thy Kingdom Come' will look very different this year because so many of us are in isolation or lock-down. So too will the Festival of Pentecost next Sunday. We are used to meeting God in community, indeed building a community upon faith is an essential part of our Christian calling. But we also need to meet God in isolation. At the moment, there is no shortage of that. When we stop we always find God. In stillness, silence, solitude, God is always present. It can be uncomfortable. We may panic because we do not know how to respond. And yet, we know that God is wisdom. God is wonder. God is mystery.

Let's hear that again: God is wisdom. God is wonder. God is mystery. If we can learn to live more comfortably with this reality, then perhaps that may help us, because God meets us in the solitude.

We get some insight into this in the Old Testament. In Genesis 32, we hear of Jacob wrestling with God when he is alone in the wilderness.

The story goes like this: 'Jacob was left alone in the wilderness, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,^[a] because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

Seeing God may be a struggle, but it is nonetheless a blessing. Solitude can be unwanted, especially when it is forced upon us. We can too easily focus upon the loss of companionship and there will be fear of the things deep within us that companionship usually helps us to avoid. But scary as these things may be, God may well be in our midst waiting to bless us and reshaping those parts of us that have for so long remained untouched.

Simple prayer can help us to deal with these tussles too, as it reminds us that God is with us in them. I find the Jesus Prayer particularly helpful: 'Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner'. Repeating this prayer over and over has a tremendous centring effect. Lighting a candle can also be a helpful prayer asking God to transform the darkness within us.

And remember, if these struggles become too much, then don't bear them alone. If you are in strict isolation, pick up the phone.

Amen