

From St John's Gospel: 'Jesus breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit'.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Shalom – peace be with you.

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Church is massively important to us both as individuals and as the wider body of Christians. It equips us with such gifts as teaching, coming together in worship, and enabling us to show the fruits of our characters: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The Spirit meets us in our time together and in our prayerfulness alone. It enables us to do and to be in a way simply impossible through our own power. It helps us be hopeful, thoughtful, appreciative and thankful. But ultimately, it helps us to be the Church, Christ's Body on Earth. Not members of a private club or institution, but together being God's people and doing God's work in the world.

Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish medieval mystic and Carmelite nun, reminds us that:

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body...  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Teresa spent 3 years as an invalid because of illness, all the time praying fervently. Once recovered, she then spent 15 years divided between worldly and godly priorities, being blown backwards and forwards, until she underwent a spiritual reawakening where the Spirit spoke divine love into her heart in a way as yet unknown to her. This led to her re-forming the Carmelite order. Despite much opposition, often from those in positions of power, she pressed on so that the order could be more removed from the frenzy of worldly politics, and so pray constantly for the troubles of the world. The Spirit moving through her also enabled her to write some profound works on prayer and the Holy life, but as the words I have just quoted suggest, it wasn't that prayer would remove one's obligation from doing good, quite the reverse. It was

for Teresa, that by becoming more in tune with God through devotion and prayer, one was then freed to do good works where it was most needed without political and societal baggage getting in the way.

St Teresa's story is not unique. There are scores of notable individuals who have followed a similar journey: Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich are just three more of the hundreds down the ages one could mention. Christian history is full of examples of individuals who have had to endure great hardship, illness, persecution, imprisonment, isolation or torture only to find their spiritual lives flourish and the Spirit speaking to them words of profound love and reassurance.

Presently, we live at a time that will be filled for many with anxiety, fear and disorientation. Theresa has more words of comfort to help us find shalom: God's peace. She says:

“Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing away:  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things.  
Whoever has God lacks nothing;  
God alone suffices.”

Shalom – Peace be with you. In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, these words will have been familiar. Shalom – peace be with you was a common greeting. On the first Easter day, when Jesus came among the disciples, it must have been some relief to them when he greeted them with these words of peace.

They had abandoned Jesus on the cross. They had run away in fear for their own lives and left him to face the brutality of religious and secular power alone, leaving him to be tortured and murdered for no good reason. Knowing all they had done, their inner sense of regret must have overwhelmed them. They must have feared that they had failed the test – whatever the test might have been.

So, it was with a profound sense of relief when Jesus greeted them with words of peace as they witnessed the miracle of his resurrection. As they gaze upon the holes in his hands, feet and side, these most blessed of wounds, their guilt must have returned with a vengeance. But within a few sentences, John's Gospel tells us that Jesus is offering

them his peace and breathing on them the Holy Spirit. Shalom – peace be with you. Familiar and yet profound in the circumstances.

Whilst we continue on high alert in our private and public lives, this pandemic continues to take its toll on individuals and society alike. In such a time as this, the reality of Jesus meeting his disciples as they are in lockdown in an upper room, can be very pertinent to our circumstances. They, like us, are hiding from an unknown foe. But it is in their isolation and desolation that Jesus comes to meet them. He soothes them with gentle and forgiving words and his soft breath. As they receive the Holy Spirit, they are filled with something they had not yet known. They feel their hearts warmed, their sins forgiven them, and they are offered new hope and new possibilities, as they are called together in ministry in his service for the rest of their lives.

All of this is possible, because in that moment they realise God's love for them.

Some thirteen hundred years later, the love of God was being revealed to another. Not this time in Palestine or Spain, but in Norwich. This young lady, just 30 years old, is laying on her bed praying as she is about to die (or so she supposes). The Spirit gifts her a vision of God's love which is the subject of one of the most profound writings of the period, quite unparalleled in English religious literature. The Revelations of Divine Love by Julian of Norwich provides remarkable insight into some of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. It includes a deep exploration of suffering, prayer and the depth of God's love to be seen in our lives and throughout creation. For Julian, even the smallest hazelnut carries three fundamental truths: 'God made it, God loves it, God keeps it'.

In our isolation, we can feel scattered, anxious and even fearful. But God's Spirit enables us to still be God's people at this time, just as it has always done, despite the restrictions placed on our lives. Jesus meets us where we are, speaks those gently soothing words of forgiveness and breathes his soft breath to strengthen and empower us as his church. And so, as the Holy Spirit descends upon us, we stand on the shoulders of spiritual giants holding true to the faith of our forebears and building foundations, just as they did, that will empower and equip God's children of tomorrow.

Shalom – peace be with you!          Amen.