



ON THIS FEAST OF FIRE, AIR, AND WATER

Our first-time visitors will, I expect, be pleased to see bright colours in our congregation today: this array and varieties of yellow, orange and red; some fuchsia and even hot pink. Let's just say that the colour parade is a visual aid, telling us that today we celebrate God, the Holy Spirit, that life-giving presence among us, which we think of as a fire burning and spreading not only here, at St James's, but throughout the churches everywhere.

I suppose we could have instead come to church today wearing wings! In the Bible, – of course, – the Holy Spirit is also represented by a dove. As the offertory hymn we will sing goes, the Spirit is a dove that brings life wherever she alights:

*She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters,
hovering on the chaos of the world's first day;
she sighs and she sings, mothering creation,
waiting to give birth to all the Word will say.*

*She wings over earth, resting where she wishes,
alighting close at hand or soaring through the skies;
she nests in the womb, welcoming each wonder,
nourishing potential hidden to our eyes. ...*

We might try wings next year. But in our choice of colours this time, we're going for fire!

If that took you by surprise, I wonder if any of you gave a second thought to the fact that we began the service with singing. Or did you, like me, simply take it for granted that music and singing is what we do in church? No matter what worship tradition or flavour of church we come from, singing is one of the things Christians do. But why should that be? Why do Christians sing?

Every Sunday we get together, there are only five things we do: (1) we pray, (2) we read the Bible and say something about the Bible reading in a sermon, (3) we share communion, (4) we have fellowship and so make a point of celebrating each other's company. But tying all of this together is (5) the act of singing.

It's like that wherever you find Christians. And it's been like that since day one of the Church. For

example, Matthew's gospel tells us that, at the last supper, after Jesus had shared with his disciples the bread and the cup of wine, they sang a hymn together. Jesus sang with his disciples; it's the last thing they did together.

Later on, when the apostle Paul is ministering to the early Christians, he says to them, when you get together to celebrate,

... speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music from your heart, ... as your way of giving thanks to God for everything in the name of Christ (Ephesians 5.19).

Hymns, psalms, songs of praise, or a canticle as we sang between the readings. Why is that?

I can think of one thing that music does for us – you will I'm sure think of others as well – but at least one thing comes to mind: music brings us together; music joins together a diversity of voices; music unites us.

In this congregation, we represent a great diversity of people typical of central London. Today, as on any given Sunday, that diversity will include people visiting from other parts of the country, and very likely from abroad. But – in our diversity of place, and in the many walks of life we come from, and the variety of ages and ethnicities we represent – we are somehow bound together in the act of singing.

This is what the Holy Spirit does: it brings us together, overcomes the things that divide us, and like music, unites us.

The opening hymn we sang says that this is a unity of LOVE and a life made new:

*Breathe on me, Breath of God;
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do.*

And even as we sang these words in the first person, – breath on ME breath of God – we let

the music, the act of singing itself, join us into this little community.

Later in the service, in our prayers, we will be joined to the much wider community of Christians everywhere, and in our act of Communion, we will speak of our unity with Christian throughout the ages, past and present. But for the moment, we have been gathered into a little community that can sing together.

The Holy Spirit is like music: she brings us together; in our diversity, she draws us out of the individual places we come from into a surprising unity, perhaps even into unexpected harmony.

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I never like to quote theologians in a sermon. Because, usually, theologians write for people reading in a study, not for congregations gathering for prayer and inspiration. But one of the theologians I go back to time and again says this of the Holy Spirit:

*This Spirit is breath, not a sharp and definite outline, not an object, but **inspiration** breathing through us.* (Hans Urs von Balthasar, paraphrased from 'Creator Spirit', Explorations in Theology, 1993, p. 111).

But what does the Spirit inspire us to?

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Did anyone follow the royal wedding yesterday? I hadn't planned to watch it, – for no other reason other than I had this sermon to prepare – but there I was, caught up in the event, and absorbed by the sermon that Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the US, gave.

Michael Curry is the first African-American bishop to serve in that capacity. And is by all accounts, a charismatic and gifted preacher. The BBC commentator said the sermons was spirited, "*forceful and uplifting.*" Or, more colourfully, as one of you said coming into church this morning: "*That wasn't curry. That was vindaloo!*"

Bishop Curry caught my attention when he quoted the late Martin Luther King to honour the love shared between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. It was both a celebration of their love, and a charge to live according to the strength of that love:

"We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love ... [For] love can help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will."

If that kind of LOVE is what the Holy Spirit inspires to, then, yes, we must celebrate it, in music, colour, fire, and light!

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In the picture of the early Church we get from our Scripture reading today, the flame of God's love comes down on the disciples, touches down and spreads horizontally like fire, going outward to everyone around them, and further beyond that: men and women, young and old, all ethnicities, languages, and places of origin:

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, everyone in their own languages, speaking up and speaking out God's deeds of power (Acts 2.9-11).

Birthday candles wouldn't be a bad idea today. Because we think of the day of Pentecost the birth of the Christian Church.

It was, in fact, one of you from this congregation who reminded me of this birthday celebration of the Church. I have been in conversation throughout the week with this person, about Pentecost and today's Scripture readings. And she had some powerful and challenging ideas about Pentecost. I walked away from these conversations enriched. In fact, let's give credit where it's due: if there is anything in this sermon that speaks to you today, it's bound to be her inspiration.

We talked about the gifts of the Spirit, about women's leadership in the Church, the priesthood of believers, about going out, being confident in God, and proclaiming the Gospel. We talked about all these things, none of which we have time to pursue in any detail today.

Her rich meditations on the Spirit sent me looking for the poet Malcolm Guite's Sonnet for Pentecost. He speaks to us, first of a birthday celebration:

Today is the feast of fire, air, and water. ...

*Today we feel the wind beneath our wings.
Today the hidden fountain flows with fire.
Today the church draws breath at last and sings,
As every flame becomes a Tongue of praise.*

This is the poet's celebration of the Spirit's flow and of our own renewal. And we, at the end of our service, will mark this with the lighting of candles in the courtyard, again, as a show of unity, and of the light each of us, and we as a gathered community, are given to shine in the world around us.

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Someday we should talk about another theme this friend – who wishes to remain anonymous – came up with: she said, the story of Pentecost talks about speaking in tongues: the apostles spoke in languages everyone could understand. But what about listening in tongues? How can we make ourselves deep, close listeners of what the Spirit is saying to us?

Incidentally, isn't that just like the Holy Spirit? Our friend doesn't want to be acknowledged. She said, it's enough that people are able to hear these thoughts. As my theologian I go back to help me reflect on the Holy Spirit tells me,

The Spirit does not wish to be seen but to be the seeing eye of grace in us. ... The Holy Spirit is the light that cannot be seen except upon the object it touches and illuminates (H.U. von Balthasar).

For now, though, I want to close by briefly reflecting on that show of unity and that commission to share the light. Because that's what I hear Bishop Sarah asking of us in the sermon she delivered at her installation as Bishop of London last Saturday.

Our bishop spoke of her sense of being a person called by God, "*with all God's people, to proclaim afresh in this generation the good news of Jesus Christ.*" And she spoke of this as a call to "*faithful improvisation*", and even more provocatively, of an ability to "*reimagine, to subvert the old ways of doing things, [and] to challenge ourselves, to speak up and speak out.*" What a phrase: "*faithful improvisation*," which I suppose means acting without a script, or to change the metaphor, painting outside the lines.

That sounds to me – in part – like a call the unity. But it sounds also like a call to take that energy

we experience in the company of this singing church, and of the other churches we are family to, and to live out God's radical, transformative love wherever we are called, – to be agents of change in our places of work, our communities, our family relationships – wherever we go, whatever we do.

So if for no other reason, I would like to see us, from time to time, include bishop Sarah in our prayers and intercessions. It's bishop Sarah's closing words from her sermon that I find most challenging, and I have to say most humbling, and which I want to leave you with. Bishop Sarah says "Will you join me?" Will you join me in being "A church which is rooted in scripture and tradition but not afraid to reimagine the future"? Will you join me in the call to the "God who I know is faithful." Will you join me in being "the sort of church and community that I believe the Lord has called me to assist in fostering, here in [London]. Will you join me?"

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When we go into the courtyard, as we receive the candle passed from this large paschal candle, we will signal that we open ourselves to be sent out and to shed something of God's light with the world.

We will be asked, and ask one another, questions that get to the heart of what Jesus says to his disciples in today's Gospel reading. Jesus says,

It is better for you if I go away, for unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send the Spirit to you.

I read this as a message of trust, that somehow God trust us, and wants to empower you and me to bring his reconciling, healing LOVE to the world around us.

This is what I hear bishop Sarah calling us back to today when she asks of us

Will you dare?
Will you dare to embrace?
Will you dare to share?
Will you dare to pray?
Will you dare to carry the light of Christ into the world's dark places, wherever they may be?

Think about what you will say to that today.
What will you dare? Ivan Khovacs