

Today, in the course of this Platinum Jubilee weekend we celebrate the feast of Pentecost: the day when the Christian church remembers the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples.

The same Spirit, which is available today, to all Christ's followers.

The same Spirit, which has supported, guided, enabled and sustained our Queen throughout her long reign.

Pentecost was a feast of celebration for the Jews.

It was also known as the Feast of Weeks and was observed on the 50th day after the offering of the Barley Sheaf at the Feast of Unleavened Bread as part of the Passover Celebration.

It was in Jerusalem, as the people gathered to celebrate this Feast of Weeks, that the early Christians experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which is described so vividly in this morning's reading.

Next week is Trinity Sunday, when we focus on God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Many of us find accepting the concept of God the Father reasonably straight forward; His is the creator who made heaven and earth who loves his creation with an everlasting love; we can see and experience his creation in all its ordered beauty and wonder and because of that we can find it possible to believe that an all-powerful, all seeing, all knowing presence exists.

We can relate to God the Son because he became like us when he took our humanity and lived on earth. Through him we can understand a little of what the Father is like. But the Holy Spirit is more difficult to understand. The name, "The Spirit" seems to conjure up ghostly, ethereal images of something completely indescribable.

So, what is the Holy Spirit?

I think that is a very difficult question to answer but in the simplest of terms The Holy Spirit is the means by which God is active in the world today and every day. Through the Holy Spirit Christ's presence can be with us at all times.

Possibly because the Holy Spirit is so intangible the church down the ages has used many symbols and visual images to help Christians understand what the third person of the Trinity is like.

The passage in Acts speaks of the rush of a violent wind and tongues of fire resting on the disciples.

In John's Gospel the spirit is described at Jesus Baptism as descending like a dove.

In Judaism God was associated with the element of wind.

In the Old Testament God promised the Israelites food and the wind brought quails to feed them in the wilderness.

The book of Exodus tells us that the east wind from God parted the Red Sea.

And looking back to the creation narrative we read that the wind from God swept over the face of the waters, and when it came to the creation of humanity God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

Fire was another element in the Old Testament associated with God's presence and power.

Elijah called down fire when he challenged the prophets of Baal. Moses met with God at the burning bush.

Fire, was then, and is still today, both welcomed and feared. It gives warmth and generates energy; it gives light and wards off danger.

It refines metals and fires the soft clay into useful pots.

But fire, if out of control, can destroy and consume.

Remember the line in the old hymn which speaks of the Holy Spirit “The dross to consume and The Gold to refine” or perhaps the chorus from the Messiah “He is like a refiner’s fire”

In the account in Acts the Spirit kindles and sets ablaze the feelings and reactions of Jesus followers and empowers them to draw others to the fire of God’s love.

A strong wind which is powerful enough can sweep away buildings and rip off roofs. But it can also power and enable a yacht or larger sailing ship to swiftly cover great distances and bring it safely to harbour.

Similarly, The Spirit is powerful, breathing life, supporting and sustaining those who commit their lives to Christ.

And what of the dove?

If you watch a pair of doves together, they often appear to express affection; they mate for life and share the nesting and parenting duties. They are gentle creatures that never resist attack or retaliate against their enemies. The dove’s innocent and gentle nature has set it apart as a symbol of peace, love, and forgiveness.

As we celebrate the first Pentecost it is important to remember that, though, and in the Spirit, the absent Christ is made present in us today empowering, sustaining and guiding. The Spirit is God’s gift to us to enable and sustain us as we seek to serve Him.

As some of you know a few years ago I did a course in Spiritual Direction.

I have to say that I don’t find the title ‘Spiritual Director’ a particularly helpful as a description. I prefer some of the other names such as Soul Friend, companion on the way, spiritual accompanier or

Metaphors, such as a bridge or my favourite, a campfire in the wilderness.

A place where someone can come, find welcome rest and peace and be warmed and refreshed to continue their journey.

The campfire imagery also reminds me that if I am to draw people closer to the fire of God’s love I need to allow God’s Spirit to keep my own fire burning.

Many years ago, I helped to make a Pentecost Banner. The design was based on the Alternative Collect for Pentecost in the ASB which was in use at the time.

The background was red (of course) in the centre were flames and round the flames were five people made from different coloured felt black, yellow, pink, brown and white, representing the five continents; these people were walking towards the fire. Round all of this was a big black circle over sewn in gold representing the sinful divided world redeemed by Christ.

The words of the Collect said this:-

Almighty God, who on the day of Pentecost sent your Holy Spirit to the disciples with wind from heaven and tongues of flame,

Filling them with joy and boldness to preach the Gospel:

Send us out in the power of the same spirit to witness to your truth

And to draw all people to the fire of your love.