

Pentecost 2021

There is an uncomfortable story told by conservatives about the Second Vatican Council – you will remember that this great Church Council of the 1960's in the Roman Catholic Church was likened to opening the windows and letting in the light and air. It was inaugurated by Pope John XXIII, and brought in changes which are still being experienced now; for us perhaps the biggest obvious change was a move from eastward to westward celebration of the Eucharist, i.e. the priest facing the people. These changes were not universally liked. Anyway, the story goes like this: John XXIII had died and was being welcomed into heaven, firstly by St Peter, then by God the Father, then by God the Son. They all said more or less the same thing, echoing the Scriptures: "Welcome good and faithful servant, inherit the blessings prepared for you". There was an important person missing however; they all looked in vain for God the Holy Spirit, and finally found him hiding in a cupboard. "What are you doing there?" said God the Father, surprised and a little cross. God the Holy Spirit looked very crestfallen. "It's a bit difficult", he said. "I was invited to a Council, and I didn't go."

Now that story, witty and slightly malicious on the part of the traditionalists, also says something a bit wider about how we view the Holy Spirit, whose festival, as it were, we are marking today. It's only in the last fifty or sixty years in the western church that we have rediscovered the Spirit, inherited in part from eastern Christianity, in other words from the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches.

For quite a long time we had been stuck with a main focus on God the Father and God the Son, God and Jesus if you like. And it doesn't take a genius now (though it was less obvious before) to see problems with that, in two ways: firstly, it's very masculine, and although these words like Father and Son are only supposed to be images or hints, they easily get stuck literally; and so you get a patriarchal Church reinforcing a patriarchal society and vice versa. Secondly, it also appears hierarchical from Father to Son, which can again reinforce a sense of knowing your place in the world, in a rigid society.

The re-introduction of the Holy Spirit threw all that up in the air. Instead of a pair, you had a community of equal persons of the Trinity, whose linking relationship was love, modelling for us human creation the love that we might have for one another, and the kind of communities we might aspire to. And the link to *sophia* or Holy Wisdom potentially brought a feminine element into the person of God.

Now, not wanting at all to take away from John White's glory in his talk next week, you will see that a focus on the Spirit this week, inevitably leads to a focus on the whole Trinity in a week's time.

In the more Protestant Churches, the rediscovery of the Spirit gave birth to the charismatic movement, and a much greater emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, with a lightening up of a rather dry and heavy emphasis on Scripture. This in turn reflected back into the Roman Church with Catholic charismatics: you really do have light and air let in.

I hope this theological and historical background shows why we always need the Spirit to invigorate our faith and enliven our liturgy – now more so than ever, with the more difficult task of coming out of our restrictions. The Holy Spirit is also the Comforter, so if like me sometimes you are feeling a bit shell-shocked or worn down, the Spirit is the right place to direct our prayers: Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire / And lighten with celestial fire / Thou the anointing Spirit art / Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart. Amen

Fr David