

David Wells is my equivalent as adult education advisor in the Diocese of Plymouth; but he is more inspirational than I am, if that can be imagined. He has written two books, the second of which I am reading at the moment. It is entitled, "*The Grateful Disciple*". Among its bite-sized chapters he tells how as a young teacher in Liverpool the Holy Spirit touched his life, in as down-to-earth manner as can be.

The school (all boys in a deprived area of the city) was tough and this particular Year 9 class was hard. David was determined to achieve something with them, to prove himself as a teacher, and to silence the cynics in the staffroom who wrote off children with alacrity. He stayed up long into the night preparing his lessons in fine detail, desperate to make his classes attractive, interesting, appealing. But this class was especially challenging. "Just sit on them" was the universal advice, led by the Headteacher.

One Tuesday he felt he had made a breakthrough. They had done their homework. It was not a contender for a Pulitzer Prize but it was their work, by each member of the class. It was a foundation upon which he felt he could build. He could help them make something of themselves and prove himself as a teacher.

We are back in an age before Facebook, computers, inter-active white boards and anything except photocopied work sheets – the new thing, and chalk and talk. He came into class, and suddenly felt empty handed. With shock he realised he had left the home-work books in the staff room. This was the work they had done that had actually been done. He intended to celebrate it, build on it and he had forgotten to bring it! He threatened the class with murder if anyone should breathe too loudly and ran back to the staff room, several flights of stairs and endless corridors away.

He ran full pelt, leaping down the stairs and hurdling any thing in his way, grabbed the books and hurtled back. Outside the classroom door he paused, to check his breathing, compose himself and look like he might be in charge. He was immediately aware of mayhem. It was a scene from 'the Lord of the Flies' but worse. One boy was hanging out of the window, held by others as he tried to distract and amuse the class below. David describes himself as numb. Helpless, out of his depth and his future stretching out before him as a failed teacher struggling on hopelessly, awaiting the nervous breakdown. He prayed. He asked God to help him if God wanted him to be a teacher despite this disaster unfolding before him.

He breathed in, raised his head in a commanding pose and walked in, kicking the door open to gain immediate attention. "I trusted you", he bellowed. Silence. All eyes turned on him.

It was then he realised he did not know any of the students. No face was familiar. He was in the wrong classroom. In the Victorian building all the corridors were the same and he had run up a flight of stairs too many in his haste. He muttered an apology and in John Cleese 'Fawlty'-fashion backed out of the classroom; only then noticing the teacher shocked at his entrance, who was sitting at his desk.

He returned to his classroom. He was unaware of the situation as he walked in and slumped into his chair. "You won't believe what I have just done", he muttered. "What?" asked a voice from the back. So he told them. They laughed. And David laughed. And then it went quiet. A companionable quiet; the quiet when a connection is made.

The class never became a version of "*The Blackboard Jungle*" or "*To Sir, With Love*". But there was a bond. There was teaching and learning within a respect that only the risk of revealing vulnerability can achieve.

We want to appear strong, in control, invulnerable whether we are a politician on the campaign trail, a teacher in a difficult class, or a parish priest in his parish. But that hinders the work of the Holy Spirit, who comes to us, St Paul tells us, "in our weakness". If we are strong, self-sufficient, not needing any one else, then the Spirit is thwarted. The events of Pentecost, when everyone heard 'each in their own language' reverses the confusion of the Tower of Babel when mankind sought to build a tower to reach heaven so they could be as mighty as the gods; an event which echoes the Garden folly when the wily serpent dangled the false-hope that their disobedience would make the couple like god.

The Spirit is unable to work with those who think they have no need of the Spirit's gifts. The Spirit comes to us in our weakness and makes us strong. The disciples had to go through terrible loss to learn their vulnerability so as to be open to receiving the Spirit in power, and so to become strong in their weakness.

Whatever our field of work we can, if we put our memories to it, recall humiliations that became renewals; disasters that led to restoration; even death which restored hope. Every one is a work of the Holy Spirit who renews, constantly, the face of the earth.