

PENTECOST – YEAR C (2019)

When we describe a situation, event or meeting with another person as being an ‘eye-opener’, we mean that it gives us information or insight that we hadn’t previously had, sometimes unexpectedly: information or insight that reveals something that had been unknown or unperceived; information or insight that gives us a wider understanding or perception of a person’s life or character, or a context or an event. And when we use such an expression as ‘eye-opener’, we are usually speaking metaphorically: yes, sometimes we human beings are so self-absorbed or distracted that we literally miss what’s going on under our noses, because our senses are focused elsewhere; but, more often than not, ‘eye-opening’ moments are those which give inward vision – they awaken and enlarge the eyes of our hearts and minds to that which our physical senses cannot perceive: to the deeper and enduring truths about God, the world and the mystery of human lives and persons.

Today, on the feast of Pentecost, the Church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit: promised by Jesus, and proceeding from the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Holy Trinity – the One who continues to inspire and guide the Church and individual human beings in their search for the truth and presence of God; the One who continues to reveal the mercy and mystery of the person of Jesus Christ to each generation and in every context; as, working

through the life of the Church – and just as frequently outside it – he opens the hearts, minds and eyes of human beings to the mysteries that both sustain and surround us; the mysteries we so often miss or fail to penetrate because our vision is blinkered, our sight is dim, and our perception is deadened by the distractions and cares of life, and the prejudices that so easily blur our inward sight like cataracts over the eyes of our minds and hearts.

Writing about the work of the Holy Spirit as the giver of vision in his book *The Go-Between God*, Bishop John Taylor says:

‘The Holy Spirit is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware. Supremely and primarily he opens my eyes to Christ. But he also opens my eyes to the brother [or sister] in Christ, or the fellow man [or woman], or the point of need, or the heart-breaking brutality and the equally heart-breaking beauty of the world. He is the giver of that vision without which the people perish. We commonly speak about the Holy Spirit as the source of power. But in fact he enables us not by making us supernaturally strong but by opening our eyes.’

The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see Jesus, to see one another as children of God, equally deserving of love, respect and care as those created in the image and likeness of God; and to see God’s presence and power at work in the world; and particularly, for those of us who are literally parochialised by the institutional Church, to see God at work in people and places beyond its walls and current reach.

Because if, as Taylor suggests, the supreme work of the Holy Spirit is to open our eyes rather than to make us supernaturally strong, then that

not only means that we have to rethink our understanding of the purpose of the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, but also our understanding of that which the Holy Spirit drives and inspires, the Church's mission – her divine call and purpose to be the Body of Christ in the world, bringing the living, ascended Jesus to his people and them to him.

Much was made in the final quarter of the last century of such phenomena as the 'Toronto Blessing': indeed, many celebrity evangelists made their careers – and not inconsiderable fortunes – riding the crest of the wave of a so-called 'New Pentecost' that was sweeping the world at that time. Indeed, you don't have to go too far from this church to find other worshipping communities whose focus is the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit – they're called Pentecostal churches for good reason. And, whilst all Christians should be open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and should – by his grace – be displaying the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives, our words, thoughts and actions; to see such gifts or fruits as a sign of individual blessing or particular divine favour is wrong; just as one cannot argue from the manner of a person's life to the depth of their faith – there are plenty of Christians out there in whom it is sometimes very hard to discern the Holy Spirit at work! No, the Holy Spirit's presence or favour is not proved by miraculous signs nor in manifestations of wealth or power; rather, he gives us power by opening

our eyes – giving us the insight to see what must be done, and the vision and strength to do it.

And this is what the Church's mission is really about: we hear so much talk about 'mission' these days – which, though not always articulated as such, means the need to get bums on seats in vast, often empty, church buildings – the desperate clarion call of the frightened and paralysed hierarchy of a dying institution. But if we take John Taylor's words seriously, then mission is about so much more. The mission which the Holy Spirit drives and inspires – literally the sending out of Christian people from the four walls of a building to be and recognise God's presence in the world – is so much wider than just about bringing people in. Remember that, when commissioning his disciples before his ascension, Jesus told his disciples to 'Go': he didn't tell them to wait for people to come to them. And in that sending out, Jesus promised the disciples the Holy Spirit so that they might have the courage, strength and vision for that task. Successive generations of Christians have literally built walls to contain our worshipping communities, and thus have, albeit unintentionally, created situations where Christians have stopped going out to others, expecting them rather to come to us, thus reinforcing an 'us' and 'them' mentality, putting up barriers, and creating cozy clubs for the initiated, rather than places of hospitality, welcome and encounter with the living God, open to all.

The vision that the Holy Spirit gives, the power to see beyond that which is obvious, and the insight with which to perceive deeper truths, is so much more attuned to what the Church's mission really is than any well-meaning 10-year mission strategy can enforce or convey. For the real work of the Holy Spirit is to open our eyes: to open our eyes to see Jesus, but equally to open our eyes to his presence in our fellow human beings, and particularly those who are in need. For the Church's mission to be authentic and credible, we Christians need to be going out to others just as much as we might expect people to come into our church buildings. We need to find ways in which to serve others in our community by going to them. If the fruits of the Spirit are to be seen in us, then we need to have our eyes opened to God's wider vision for human life and flourishing – as the blinkers are taken off, the cataracts removed, and we are able to see how, when and where to meet the practical needs of God's people in our community, whether they will ever set foot in this building or not.

Mission is about so much more than getting people into church buildings: yes, of course it's important that people worship God, receive the sacraments and enter into eternal life; and, yes, it's equally important that we seek and use opportunities to share and commend our own Christian faith to others. But it's just as important to allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through us, giving us a fresh vision for ways in

which we might perceive the needs of those whom we are called and sent out to serve; and the insight to see that in serving others it is Christ himself whom we serve, who always comes to us in the guise of those who are in need, or rejected, or whom we or society place beyond the pale.

I would like us to find new ways of going out to people in our community: of finding practical – however simple – ways of making a difference to the lives of the people in our parish, many of whose lives are very hard and pressured, and whose troubles we know so little about. The Holy Spirit does not drive our mission so that we might be ‘do-gooders’, but so that our eyes might be opened to see the Christ we receive at the altar in the faces of one another; and, in serving them, to receive more from their hands so much more than we’d ever be able to give.

We all need to have our eyes continually opened, for they close so easily to God, to one another, to mystery and to truth. This is the work of conversion, the work of the Holy Spirit: on this feast of Pentecost may our prayer be that the Holy Spirit will indeed take from our hearts the hardness that closes our inward eyes; and may give us the insight to see what needs to be done, and the strength to do it, by leading us – however unwillingly – as individuals and as a Christian community to ever more ‘eye-opening’ places and people. Amen.