

PENTECOST 2021 (YEAR B) – Final service at St Martin's

(PROPS: Big box, heart-shaped helium balloon inside)

'Happy birthday'! As today, the feast of Pentecost, the church celebrates the day of its birth.

And so, as is the custom for birthdays, I have brought you a gift (BOX)

However, I'm going to keep you in suspense! I'm not going to reveal what's inside this box until the end.

Which is not just a ploy to ensure you stay to hear all my sermon! But by keeping what is in here a mystery for a little longer, I want you to experience a similar sense of waiting that the disciples experienced after Jesus had promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, Jesus's gift was far more special than this one! And a gift that I will now be referring to in the feminine form, because in the original Hebrew the grammatical gender of the word for 'spirit' is feminine; something which I was happy to discover, not because I'm a woman, but because it just feels far more in keeping with a God of balance and inclusivity.

And so, as we read in John's gospel today, all the disciples really knew about this gift that Jesus promised them was that She was the Spirit of Truth, and their Advocate

that She would come from the Father and, that She would only be given to them after Jesus had left them... ..

And this was a thought that immediately filled them with sorrow, because of course they didn't want to lose Jesus.

And yet Jesus tells His disciples: "It is to your advantage that I go away" (v7)

And this is a statement which immediately brings to mind a similar phrase that I have heard a lot through my curacy: "It will be good for you!" – words that have regularly emanated from Noelle's lips, just after she has given me some new responsibility that has made my stomach drop to my toes and my heart rate suddenly go up 10 beats... ..! However, despite that initial fear and dread on my part she has of course always been right! Those experiences have always been of benefit – to me, and as a consequence, to others as well.

And similarly Jesus knows that the gift of the Holy Spirit will benefit not only His disciples but many, many others... .. Jesus knew that in His human form there were limits to where He could be at any one time – but that the Spirit of God cannot be contained... She is the Spirit of creation itself, freely moving in and around God's creation, bringing into being, especially since that first day of Pentecost, a new renewed humanity. Because God's Holy Spirit brings the power of God to His children. The power to be changed by God's transforming love, and to consequently become agents of His transforming love...

As Nick Fawcett's wonderful re-telling of that first Pentecost which Peter read for us, describes:

Yes, I know we'd been told to expect it,
the promise given by Christ Himself,
but as to what it meant,
what it actually involved,
we'd no idea until that incredible moment
when the Spirit came.
... .. bang! - and our lives were changed for ever.

...gifts beyond our most fantastic dreams,
a joy that burned unquenchably within us
and a sense of purpose which nothing could contain.
We were no longer on our own, gazing wistfully to the
heavens -
Christ was with us,
and in a way more wonderful than he'd even been before;
not just by our side,
but in our hearts,
filling our whole being with His presence."

The power of the Holy Spirit on that day of Pentecost changed a
handful of people from frightened friends of Jesus who had been
hiding away in a small room, into bold witnesses able to go out to
a huge crowd and stand and proclaim the good news of Jesus
Christ... .. testifying, in a way that people could understand, to
the truth that through Jesus Christ everyone can be saved.

Because as Jesus pronounces, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of
Truth.

And what a timely reminder that is, in a week where the news has
been full of the deception that was behind Martin Bashir's
interview with Diana 26 years ago, an interview which arguably
had tragic consequences... .

And of course the Truth is something that Jesus has previously
already ascribed to Himself, telling His disciples... . "I am the way,
and the truth and the life" (John 14:6)

And promising, that "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32)

Because that is what God wants... ..that is what Jesus came to

make possible, and that is what the Holy Spirit empowers us to

be able to do – to be set free – free from all that keeps us separated from God... (as we realise the truth of what Jesus did for us on the cross, selflessly offering His life for ours, so that our sins could be forgiven and forgotten); and consequently free from everything that binds us and stops us having the fullness of life that God has made us to have!

Free from all our fears, anxieties, addictions, unforgiveness, envies, jealousies... .. There are so many things that prevent us from having peace – peace within ourselves and with others ..

And that is not what God wants for His children... .. that is not what God wants for each one of us... ..

As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, through His Holy Spirit God wants us to have the freedom to live a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23)

We are all children of God, made in His image, with His love inside each one of us. And the Holy Spirit is a gift of God's extravagant love... .. sent by the God of love, to those He loves, for the perpetuation of His love... ..

And that is the truth which finally brings me to this box... ..

Because I'm not going to keep you waiting any longer... ..well maybe just a little bit!

Because as you know this is my last service here today... .. which is an exceptionally sad moment... .. but goodness, what an amazing and blessed curacy I've had... so many wonderful memories... .. As I wrote in this month's newsletter, it truly has been 'the time of my life'

And so this is my parting gift to you (OPEN BOX for balloon to rise) – which hopefully won't make you think of someone who was full of hot air! But will remind you of the love that we have shared and that I will always have for you.

Even more importantly though, as we celebrate Pentecost today, I want this gift to remind you of the even greater gift that God has given us. The gift of His unconditional love – a gift that He freely gives to everyone...

A life-saving, life-giving, life-changing love, that by the power of His Holy Spirit can enable us to live and enjoy the life that God wants us to have – a life in all its fulness, that can transform His creation... ..

I read a quote this week from the diary of Etty Hillesum, a young woman who died at Auschwitz at the age of 29, but whose deepening relationship with God in the last two years of her life led her into great solidarity with those who suffered, and to loving God even in her enemies. She wrote:

“We could fight war and all its excrescences by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us, and giving it a chance to live. . . .”

I pray that the image of this red heart-shaped balloon as it rose up out of the box... . and is now moving and floating around in the air... .. will be a reminder that God can never be contained... . He can and will do more than we can possibly imagine and ask to bring His creation into a place of unity and love... ..

Through Jesus, God the Father shows us what love looks like... and by the gift and power of His Spirit He invites us all to be set free... . to live and be witnesses of His truth and love... .

Pentecost was but the first day of the rest of eternity. And as Nick Fawcett writes:

I tell you what,
impossible though it seems,
I shouldn't wonder if God has more yet in store,
new experiences of his love,
new expressions of his purpose, not just for us but for
everyone

So, paraphrasing the words of Chris Bowater, let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit, we welcome you...
Let the breeze of your presence blow,
That your children here might truly know
How to move in the spirit's flow.
Accomplish in us today
Some new work of loving grace we pray.
And unreservedly have your way,
Holy Spirit, come... to us today

AMEN