

The Dean reflects on the presence of the Holy Spirit (from the BCP services for the Day of Pentecost).

The Anglican tradition rather downplays the role of the Holy Spirit in comparison with other churches. Perhaps that is because we are rather cerebral people and, being interested in words and ideas, rather than feelings, we get tied up in knots trying to understand the Spirit in the context of the Trinity.

But today's gospel reading points us to the active role of the Spirit, as comforter and teacher, as a person in relationship with us, a relationship built on love.

The word, which is here translated as comforter, but sometimes also counsellor or helper, comes from the Greek word "parakletos," which can also be translated as "one called alongside". The Holy Spirit is called by God to be alongside us to provide aid and support. The Holy Spirit is how God is present with us in the world today.

It is tempting to think of a comforter like one of those bits of blanket that small children get attached to, or a cosy duvet that you can snuggle under, so it might also be helpful to remember that the Spirit is described as "active" and "disturbing" as well.

God's reassurance is there when we are in distress or trouble, not like an anaesthetic or an escape hatch, but to strengthen us in facing the realities of life.

As with any gift of grace, we can't earn or command the presence of the Holy Spirit but we can practice the presence of the Holy Spirit. Practising the presence of the Holy Spirit is another way of speaking about prayer.

We are told that in the period between Ascension and Pentecost, the disciples were gathered in an upper room praying fervently. No doubt they were remembering the words that Jesus spoke before he died, the ones that we read in our gospel today, the words of reassurance and promise. "the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost,

whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”

That discipline and practice of prayer opened their hearts to be ready to receive the gifts of the Spirit when the Spirit came. We should not underestimate the fear that they must have been feeling, remembering how Jesus was tortured and killed. That possibility remained for each of them. Yet, empowered by the gifts of the Spirit, they faced the reality and did not remain locked away but left the upper room and went out into the world.

The disciples were given the gift of eloquent speech that helped them to share the good news of Jesus with those around them. They were given the gift of courage that helped them to face persecution. They were given the gift of love that built them together into a new community, the church.

We do not know how they prayed, but we might guess that they both followed the practice of Jesus by spending time in silence and that they talked, sharing the stories, the good news, that they remembered Jesus sharing with them. As instructed, they prayed for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit, confident in asking God for what they needed, as they had been taught to do.

I wonder how you pray and what you pray for?

Practising the presence of the Holy Spirit might look like silent prayer. Trying to open our minds and hearts to the presence of God by clearing the space. I sometimes describe this like sweeping a room, clearing out the rubbish so that there is space for God. Many people, me included, do this by using a single word or phrase repeatedly, so that there is something to come back to when, inevitably, we are distracted by other thoughts. This practice is helped by paying attention to your breathing and slowing it down. That actually has an impact on your para-nervous system which connect the parts of the body that are needed for good health, in other words it builds resilience against stress.

Practising the presence of the Holy Spirit might look like reading and reflecting on scripture. By recalling the words of Jesus, the disciples were strengthened in their faith. They recalled the promises that Jesus made, and they prayed that those things would indeed happen. They prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit and their prayer was answered. Perhaps they prayed also for the gifts of the Spirit, for faith, hope and love, for courage, patience and kindness.

Which leads me to ask, do you have the courage to pray for the things that you really need?

I was struck by a conversation with a friend, a fellow priest, who is much more rooted in silent prayer and reflection than I am. He is someone whose prayer life I always assume is very much richer and more disciplined than mine. But for a while he has been thinking about leaving his present parish. Nothing seemed to be coming up and he expressed surprise when his spiritual director asked him, "Have you prayed for a new parish?"

It hadn't occurred to Bruce to ask God for the thing he wanted or needed. As he told this story he explained that when he did pray for just that thing, he felt incredibly reassured, because God clearly said, "Yes, now be patient" not "No, it's not the right time."

And to finish the story, Bruce is off to a new parish in the Summer, one where he will be able to spend more time in prayer and teaching, which is his gift and vocation.

Please join me now in prayer.

Father of us all,
Send your Holy Spirit to teach us how to pray,
Send your Holy Spirit to give us the needful gifts of grace
And the courage to ask for the things we need
Send your Holy Spirit so that our prayer may be answered,
Through Jesus Christ
Amen