



## Whitsun Sermon, St Andrew's 2021

*"Unfathomed love divine, reign Thou within my heart!"*



*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

**Amen.**

"Happy birthday" to the Church! (not quite sure we're the sort of church that would sing "happy birthday" in the service, though my wife's does...) How have your birthday celebrations changed over the years – and this year? My 50<sup>th</sup> will be very different from my 40<sup>th</sup> – not least because I'm now married! When we're younger, our birthdays can be purely celebratory but, as we get older, they can perhaps become more reflective. I'm looking at my "bucket list" of things I might wish to do during my life – it's quite long, and very musical! How do we "do" birthdays well as Christians, and as a Church? Perhaps this can involve reflecting on our own spiritual journey of life, and that of our church and Church; not all of it perfect, of course – as one carol puts it, "beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong". "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" – reflection can include repentance! The Church's birthday, White Sunday, has often been marked with Whit Week holidays, new/white clothes, Baptisms and Confirmations – and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the Church's great three Feasts of the year (after Christmas and Easter), when Holy Communion was specially celebrated. Larkin's "Whitsun Weddings" paints the celebrations well, and in another poem of this season's greening, writes "begin afresh, afresh, afresh". In 1945, when the war in Europe was ending, a young man was confirmed at Whit, making his first Communion on Trinity Sunday – my uncle. The Church's birthday is marked with surprising gifts – wind and flame, breath like that which restores life in Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones – and an outpouring of glad tidings of great joy to all people. What gifts have you received from God?

Preaching on Whit (and Trinity) has been perceived as “difficult” – how can one speak about the Spirit by whom, with whom, in whom one speaks? Chaplain Malcolm Guite wrote similarly about God’s wisdom, “O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,  
O Light within the light by which I see,  
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,  
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me...”

The Spirit can seem elusive in much religious writing, but present wherever the tone speaks love. Our third great Feast is perhaps one of the greatest offerings of our Faith to God’s world: many at its fringes may find even Christ distant – but today we are offered “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2, often read in Holy Week) – that “power to become sons of God” of which we read in St John at Christmas. Our Creeds and Litany proclaim the Holy Ghost as proceeding from the Father and the Son, and much of St John’s Gospel reflects this – Christ as bringer of the Spirit, His purpose and present to each of us: to set out all that is needful for us, in earth and heaven, and then to bless us, breathe on us and say “over to you”.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is perhaps actually the Acts of the Spirit: the book when the “action” moves from Christ to us and, unready, we are given the most surprising gifts and called to step out into a world needing fresh infusions of faith, hope and love.

Now, this year, is surely a season for the Spirit – when so many are still lonely, anxious, bereaved, exhausted or simply lethargic: many chaplains I know are seeing great weariness, where just reopening the barber’s isn’t enough alone to put a spring in your step (though it’s certainly helped me)! St Paul writes to the Romans that the Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words (even the words in this phrase are imperfect!), and now we deeply need the Spirit’s wings, to enter where

many of us still feel cooped up, struggling to stride out – “in all ages entering into holy souls, She maketh them friends of God”. We need this quiet, private action of the Spirit in our souls just now – and the broad sweep of Her(?) wings in human affairs, to gentle and wisen our society (“wisen” should surely be a Saxon word “to make wiser”?).

One of our great failings in Christianity has been “misunderestimating” the Spirit – our images of Her(?) tend to become small: it’s easy in this country for “dove” to become “pigeon”! I recently stayed at Whalley Abbey in Lancashire, about my uncle’s business, and was moved by their huge, striking icon of the Spirit above the chapel’s altar, the wingspan embracing the room and the world – I hope to share copies of this image with you.

This Whit, I pray for you and us all the fullness of the flowers and fruits of the Spirit; of all Her(?) gifts and graces: I cannot exhort such things, but am passionate for you to comprehend (to know in your heart), with all the saints, what is the breadth, and depth, and height, of God’s love for you: for you to feel your heart “strangely warmed”, as Wesley wrote: to seek wherever you find yourself smiling in surprise from the Spirit (CS Lewis’ bereavement autobiography is called *Surprised by joy*) – to “rejoice in His holy comfort” - for your face to shine in Spirit like those who have seen the Face of God. There’s been a Church campaign called “setting God’s people free” (which can mean “all things to all men”!) – and I pray that, in all its diversity, for each of us.

When younger, I thought that God had a plan, if only we had a big enough table to unroll it (John Donne writes well about this): but increasingly I suspect that the work of love in life is more adaptable: no human work is perfect, but the Spirit can never be extinguished, caged, predicted, or stomped out by jackboots – the fire smoulders underground, the river finds a way through, and the wind bloweth where

it listeth. May these images not overwhelm, but embolden, empower and equip each of us, in our lifelong discipleship. Let us pray.

*O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favourably on Your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of Your providence, carry out in tranquillity Your plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by Him through whom all things were made, Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** (from *Calling on the Spirit in unsettling times – discerning God's future for the Church.*)*

May our life be embraced in the Spirit's wings, as all Time is, from the first words of the Bible to the last:

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*

Come, Holy Spirit, **R.: and renew the face of the earth.**

*The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

Come, Holy Spirit, **R. and baptise us with water and fire.**

*The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let him that heareth say, "Come." And him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. **R. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!***

May the Spirit of truth lead you into all truth, give you grace to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and to proclaim the word and works of God, *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

**AMEN.**