

Homily: Pentecost 2020

I have never been a gardener, and I never particularly wanted one. I do like to see a nice garden, but don't want the hard work to produce it. However lockdown has forced it upon me. The parishioners who normally look after the Presbytery garden, have not been allowed to come and do it. Because of the very wet, grey, windy times from September almost until lockdown, it was virtually impossible to do anything. So part of each afternoon I have done quite a lot to clear it, and make it reasonable. Gardening, indeed life, does face us with the four basic elements, **earth, air, fire and water**.

The earth is the given. The air, wind: even the past few days have been quite windy here. The 'fiery sun' has shone amazingly for most of the lockdown so far, and naturally the ground is parched and longing for water, even after all that rain the previous months. I hear it crying 'I thirst.'

Three of those elements are all images the scriptures give of the Holy Spirit. All of them one way or another are vital for life.

They can be gentle, as gentle as a light breeze, just to cool the heat, 'pleasant coolness in the heat.' The flowing water, pure and clear, or a refreshing shower, to water the earth. A flickering flame alight for warmth and sight. All of these, in one form or another vital for life and living.

We know equally they can also be destructive. We can drown in water, fire can utterly destroy and kill, wind can take our breath away, and without breath we die. There is great power in all of them, and we've seen all in recent months, for good or ill. The raging fires, the violent storms, the floods, the earthquakes. Nothing remains the same either way; but good can always come out of what we think of as bad.

They are powerful, dynamic, which is from the Greek *Dunamis*, power, force, might, a word the gospels use to describe Jesus' powerful, mighty, marvellous works. All those are given to us as images of the Holy Spirit.

The 1st reading speaks of the sound, like a powerful wind from heaven, filling the whole house. We cannot see the wind, but we can feel and see the effect of the wind. Jesus speaks about that in John Ch 3, in conversation

with Nicodemus, when he is speaking about being born through water and the Spirit. In verse 8 Jesus says “The wind blows where it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit.” Our breath is like the wind; we perhaps blow on something hot to cool it, or on our cold hands to warm them with our breath.

The gospel passage today speaks of Jesus breathing on them: we often sing, ‘Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew’. In consecrating the Holy Chrism, the bishop breathes on the vessel containing the oil of chrism before the blessing of it. Genesis Ch 2 speaks of the Lord God fashioning man of dust from the soil, and breathing into his nostrils the breath of life.

Most years I do speak about the elements, normally concentrating on wind and fire. This year I want to look more particularly at water. The very opening of the Bible, the first verses of Genesis says “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, and there was darkness over the deep, and God’s Spirit hovered over the water.” We know that the earliest form of life was water. Both scripture and scientific research are in accord with that.

Creation is the 1st reading at the Easter vigil.

In Hebrew, it is the word ‘breath’ or ‘wind,’ which signifies ‘spirit.’ Here we have the Spirit of God, as breath, named just before the Word. Word and Spirit are like the two hands of God the creator. In the beginning are the opening words also of St John’s Gospel. In his first chapter John the Baptist figures and speaks of baptising in water, but unknown to them is the one coming after him, Jesus, who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist also says he saw “the Spirit coming down on him from heaven like a dove and resting on him.”

Water then figures in the early chapters of John’s Gospel. We recall the changing of water into wine at Cana,(Ch; 2) the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus,(Ch; 3) and then the longest dialogue with Jesus recorded in all the Gospels, the Samaritan woman at the well, which we had on the 3rd Sunday of Lent (Ch:4) then the cure of the sick man at the Pool of Bethzatha, a reservoir near the Temple in Jerusalem (Ch; 5) and Jesus walks on the water (Ch;6) and during the Feast of Tabernacles, which

celebrates after the Exodus, the period in the wilderness. It is a harvest feast, but each morning the Levitical priests drew water from the pool of Siloam, carried it in procession to the Temple, and poured out as a libation next to the altar of sacrifice. This connected to Jesus teaching in Ch.; 7 vv37-39, the promise of living water. “Jesus stood there and cried out; ‘If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink.’ As scripture says: from his breast shall flow fountains of living water. He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified.”

You know I’m always saying how everything of our faith links together, and connects. St John in these verses is drawing together the various aspects of the theme of water in his previous chapters. At the wedding at Cana the water for purification was changed into the wine of celebration at the uniting of heaven and earth.

Nicodemus was told of the need for birth into supernatural life by water and the Holy Spirit. At the well in Samaria thirst for water leads up to the satisfaction of life’s inner thirsts through a relationship with Jesus. For the cripple at the pool, entering the water was the way to the Promised Land of health and freedom. The walking on the water links the sign of the loaves and fishes with the Exodus story and the first Passover. The stream of water and blood, which issued out of the open side of Jesus on the cross (Ch. 19: 34) were to be a symbol of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the world at the return of Jesus to the Father.

At the climax of the church’s liturgy, the Easter Vigil, after the celebrations of light and word, water is blessed for the celebration and renewal of baptism. And in various blessings, water is used as a reminder of baptism and a symbol of the sanctifying Spirit.

St Cyril of Jerusalem, (bishop C. 315) in his instructions to catechumens (those becoming Christians) picks up from the Samaritan woman (Ch; 4 14) “The water that I shall give will turn into a spring inside, welling up to eternal life.”

‘This is a new kind of water, living, welling up, and welling up for those who are worthy. Why did Jesus call the grace of the Spirit water?’

Because all things depend on water. Water produces all living things. Water comes down from heaven as rain: water always comes down in the same form, yet its effects are manifold – thus it takes one form in the palm-tree and another in the vine; it is in all things and takes all forms, though it is uniform and always remains itself. For the rain does not change, coming down now as one thing and now as another, but it adapts itself to the nature of the things which receive it and it becomes what is appropriate to each.

Similarly with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is one and of one nature and indivisible, but apportions grace as he wills to each. The Spirit's approach is gentle, a presence fragrant, and a yoke very light, rays of light and knowledge shine forth. The Spirit comes to save, to heal, to teach, to admonish, to strengthen to console, to enlighten the mind.'

Plenty in all that for our reflection as lockdown eases a tiny bit! Well do we pray and sing our psalm today, 'Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth.'