

Pusey House, Oxford

Pentecost Sunday, 2017

Deuteronomy 16.9-12

Psalm 122

Acts 2.1-11

John 14.15-end

One of the great themes of St. John's gospel is the intimacy with God into which Christ draws us. This morning, we heard Christ teaching his disciples: 'At that day ye shall know that I am *in* my Father, and ye *in* me, and I *in* you.' We are 'in' God through Christ, but Christ is also 'in' us. Think of the image of the vine and the branches in John 15: 'I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.' We are grafted into Christ as branches grafted to the vine so that the sap of Jesus' life becomes the sap of our lives; we become one. The ancient Christian teachers spoke of receiving the Eucharist in exactly these intimate terms: we receive the body of Christ into our bodies, but our bodies thereby become assimilated to Christ's body. Christ is in us; we are in Christ. Christ even tells his disciples in this morning's gospel 'If a man love me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, *and make our abode with him.*' God will make his home with his people. What we have, I think, is a picture of God reconciling us to himself through the atoning sacrifice of Christ so that God can make his home with us and in us, and we can be comfortable in the divine presence; comfortable in the sense that, through the forgiveness of sins, nothing in all creation – nothing, ever – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Today, Pentecost Sunday, fifty days after the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord, what we celebrate is the gift of the Holy Spirit who draws us into that intimate relation with God, into the very life of God in Christ. In St. John's gospel, we are taught that the Holy Spirit will take what belongs to Christ – that eternal intimacy with God – and give it to his people. So the Holy Spirit is that eternal person of the Godhead who, from the Father and through Christ, is given to us to draw us into the eternal mystery of the divine life. The Holy Spirit is the gift, the *donum*, as the ancient Christians put it.

In our first reading this morning from Deuteronomy, we learn that this drawing of God's people into intimacy with him had already begun with another gift at the very first Pentecost, known as the festival of weeks or Shavuot, fifty days after the Passover. This is the festival when the Jewish people traditionally celebrate the gift of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai – the law given to draw God's people into his fellowship. The second gift of the Holy Spirit – not only of a law, but of God himself poured into our hearts – finally draws us deep into the divine life. I'd like to talk for a moment this morning about the gifts of God – of law and Spirit – and how they draw us into God's life, and what that life might look like, all in terms of the notion of gift that is so central to the way that we think about the person of the Holy Spirit, the *donum*, the given. It's a life, I think, centred on the exchange and sharing of gifts that form and mediate our relationships. But let's begin with the way in which we commonly relate to each other in contemporary culture.

In western liberal capitalist democracies, so many of our relationships are mediated by debt and account, duty and right, legal obligation and liability. We sell our labour, trade through the market in goods and services, hold each other

to rights and obligations through the courts. But anthropologists tell us that our most valuable relationships with friends and family are mediated not by debt and account or rights and duties, but through the exchange of gifts. By gifts, we don't mean simply birthday presents, but any kind of donation – the gift of time to this chapel, a meal cooked for one's friends, raising a child, the gift of attention given to a student, a kindness offered to a stranger. One important aspect of twentieth century philosophical reflections on the gift is whether gift-giving must be one way and therefore selfless and altruistic – from donor to recipient with no expectation of return. Many anthropologists, philosophers and theologians argue that there are very good reasons for thinking that genuine gifts are reciprocal. In other words, when we give a gift we expect a response or 'return gift', but don't anticipate what that return gift might be. The gifts exchanged may be of completely different orders or kinds. A teacher spends endless hours running an after-school club, way beyond what's required or expected, and the pupils make a card to give in return. I buy my son a bike for Christmas and the return gift is a smile and a 'thank you' – the simple recognition that what he has received is a gift, lest it become a mere possession. Care and cards, bikes and smiles – the gifts exchanged are not reducible to money, markets, debts, accounts.

The point is that the gifts that are exchanged form and mediate our most valuable and intimate relationships. As the twentieth century anthropologist Marcel Mauss put it, a gift bears something of the donor to the recipient – something of the donor's character, style or love. And gifts bear meaning. I have an iPad on my desk at home which I bought for work. It's very useful and would be worth £200 or so if I were to sell it. But it doesn't mean anything – it bears no significance. I also have a pot on my desk bought for me by a friend when we

were in Jerusalem together. On eBay, it'd be worth nothing, but its value lies in what it means: the mediation of a relationship and a shared visit to a holy and ancient city. The pot is not particularly useful and its value exceeds its tradeable value in monetary terms. But it's sacramental – it's a sign of something, of life shared and a friendship formed.

So gifts mediate and form relationships. They are exchanged and form bonds of family, friends and communities. Indeed, the Christian tradition speaks of creation itself as the most fundamental, unmerited, gratuitous and unnecessary gift of God as he brings into existence out of nothing that which is not God. God gives being. Everything we are, everything we have, is not by right or merit. Our very existence is a gift. St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4 'what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?'

But St. Paul's words also point us to a real problem. What do we have that we did not receive? In short, nothing. We receive everything from God, but have nothing to give back in return. God is utterly replete and in need of nothing. There is nothing I can return to God that I have not first received from God. The relation between God and creatures is so asymmetrical that it seems that a relationship with God based on the exchange of gifts would be impossible.

But not quite. The first gift of God, through the Holy Spirit who brooded over the waters of creation, is our very existence: the unique people we are. The second gift, the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts, draws us into the eternal and mysterious exchange of the gift of love that we call God that begins in thankfulness. This is St. Paul's continual refrain – be thankful – and we read in

the letter to the Ephesians, in the meditation on the life of the Church, that in our song we are 'Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' In short, this is Eucharistic living. What we give first to God by the Holy Spirit is thanksgiving, the recognition that what we have received is gift, replete with meaning, that forms and mediates a new intimacy with God. This is why we make our children say 'thank you', because without that 'thank you' a gift is not recognised and becomes merely a thing or a right. But once we give thanks, we are drawn into a relationship between donor and recipient in which genuine exchange is possible, genuine intimacy is possible. In short, we are drawn into a relationship in which life can be shared. That's what the Holy Spirit draws us into – a share in the life of God.

Once we share life with God, we are drawn into a new shared life with each other that we call the Church. The one Spirit is poured out upon the disciples in Jerusalem, but with it come varieties of gifts. The Church is born in the outpouring of the Spirit as the community of the gifted – the community of shared or exchanged gifts.

Finally, this idea of being drawn by the gift of the Spirit into intimate relation with God beginning with thankfulness, a relation where the gift of life is shared and enjoyed, nevertheless presents us with a certain challenge. You see, if I were to regard my life as a brute fact, the outcome of a blind evolutionary process, I could only talk of my life as 'gift' in a metaphorical sense because there is not donor. But theologically, seen as the first gift of the Spirit at creation and the second gift of new life with God through Christ and the Spirit of thanksgiving, my life is literally a gift. And gifts, because they bear something of the donor to the recipient, something of God to us, make a claim on us. A gift, to remain a

gift, must be given again. How will we nurture that gift and how will we share it, give it again to others? To what, to whom, will we donate our new life with God given through Christ by the Spirit?

The Holy Spirit takes what belongs to Christ and gives it to us: a share in the eternal intimacy of the life of God. That same Spirit, poured out over the Apostles in Jerusalem, the one Spirit that brings a variety of gifts to form the community of the gifted, makes the Church one. We share our life of thanksgiving at the altar of the Lord, to be drawn into intimacy with God and a share in his eternal life through his Son Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts for our sanctification. Come, Holy Spirit, and fill the hearts of your people, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.