

Homily for the Day of Pentecost

A sermon preached at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday 28 May 2023 (The Day of Pentecost), by the Right Reverend Paul Thomas, Bishop of Oswestry

FRIENDS, today is the Church's fiery feast of God the Holy Spirit: the Day of Pentecost is come. Pentecost is both completion and commencement. It is completion, in that the Lord Jesus, who was crucified and descended into the abyss of God-forsaken Death, and was raised triumphantly to life, ascends into heaven and – seated on the Father's right - sends the Comforter to mark the fulfilment of all he came to do, the fulfilment of his Passover. Christ's salvific mission is accomplished and crowned at Pentecost.

But the coming of the Holy Spirit also marks a commencement, the beginning of a wholly new Age; the Age that is to obtain until Christ comes again in power and great glory. Pentecost marks the beginning of the Age of the Church, the Age in which and through which the Ascended and Glorified Lord continues His reconciling work, continues His salvific mission in the world – no longer in the body that He took at His incarnation (a body limited by time and space), but now in His Mystical Body, His continuing incarnation, the Church. Whereas once the Saviour spoke divine wisdom with a man's voice, and stretched out His hands to heal, absolve, cast-out, raise up, He does so now through his Church's teaching office and her sacraments. Christ shares and shews forth His life, He announces His Kingdom and effects it in the souls of men, He grants to those who believe a very grafting into Himself, precisely by the sanctifying power of God the Holy Spirit. He is ever preparing men to receive Christ; ever manifesting Christ to them; He is ever making the mystery of Christ present, supremely so in the Holy Eucharist.

How fitting that on this Solemnity of the Holy Spirit, we should be celebrating no fewer than three of the Church's sacraments, one of which – Confirmation – can rightly be called 'the Sacrament of the Holy Spirit'. Indeed, most of you (all, I sincerely hope) also made your confession and so received sacramental absolution for your sins in preparation for this day, which makes a tally of no fewer than four. In each of these sacraments, Christ is present to you, Christ continues His ministry among you, Christ is drawing you ever closer to Himself and raising you up ever further into the

Triune love of God. And at your confirmation today, God the Holy Spirit comes with the very same power as He did when first He came at Pentecost.

We hear in the Acts of the Apostles this morning how a mighty rushing wind was heard, and tongues of flame lighted upon each of the Apostles. You, my friends, need to know this – when God the Holy Spirit comes, He comes with power to give power. Both wind and flame are symbolic of precisely that power. They are both highly dynamic forces, uncontrollable, filled with propulsion and potency. What is conferred upon you today through my apostolic hands is not a sacrament that enfeebles but one that enflames. Wherever the Holy Spirit is, He brings and gives power – He takes what is barely simmering and brings it up to the boil. And note that the flame when it comes, comes in the shape of what? A tongue. Speech. Fiery speech is a definitive mark of the Holy Spirit: bold confession – bold defence - bold proclamation. He gives you – this very day - the gift and power of fiery speech. You are to speak powerfully to the world. About what? Well, not about yourselves, that is for certain - with the self-referring, self-obsessing introspection so characteristic of contemporary culture. I'm sorry to break this news to you, but you're not that interesting and it is not all about you. No, 'about the wonderful works of God', of course. Your fiery speech is to tell the world about what God has done for you in Christ; about what life lived in the communion of the Holy Spirit is like; you are to speak powerful words in defence of the Church, powerful words of explicit and intentional invitation to others; you must give a compelling account for the hope that is in you, and defend the Faith you have received. Put away the tepid, timid speech that for so long has bedevilled the Church's life and mission. No one has ever been converted by a Christian who wrestles unendingly with questions, who wrings his hands with uncertainty, and communicates the Faith of Christ with no more force than a mewling kitten. Let the fire of the Holy Spirit burn that up in you. You are each, like the Apostles, to communicate profoundly and convertingly 'the wonderful works of God', which is biblical language for the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection, which saving mystery is fully re-presented and re-received in the Mass.

And if He brings power, the Holy Spirit also brings the gift of unity. St Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, is careful to list the resonantly named places from around the Eastern Mediterranean which are represented in Jerusalem by pilgrims at the Temple Feast. The residents of these places each hear in their own language the Apostles speaking of Christ's victory over death; they each hear the Gospel proclaimed. And this is the Spirit's gift of unity, that all people are drawn into a profound

communion around the person and work of Christ the Saviour. Babel is undone in Pentecost, the cacophony of competing voices so illustrative of a world fallen away from God (and fallen apart because of its fall), is overcome and healed by the Word of the Father. With this in your minds, be alert to the spirit that seeks separation; the spirit that seeks to divide you from God and from one another, for such a spirit is not the Holy Spirit of God but the Dark Spirit whose very name is Division ('Diabolos'), who sees the Church alive and growing, hates what he sees, and wishes to sunder and splinter it.

Dear Confirmands, you have two tasks – protect the Faith you have received, and proclaim it in fiery words that move and convert others to Christ. Be bold in your defence of the Faith you have received, and as bold in proclaiming it to the world. And love the unity of the Church. May God the Holy Spirit, when He rushes upon you in power at your confirmation, fill you with seven-fold grace and make you radiant with Chris