

Caritas 08

The Brighton Centre, Diocese of Chichester Festival

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Address by The Bishop of Norwich, The Rt Revd Graham James

‘Jesus said “out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water”. Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive’. (John 7.38, 39).

In the distant past a group of theological students (your preacher among them) helped to make a programme for Radio Oxford. It was thirty-five years ago in the earliest days of local radio. They must have been desperate in those days to ask us. Whitsunday was approaching. That’s what we then called Pentecost. Some of our number took the easy option and went out on the streets to do what they call a vox pop. People were asked what Whitsun was all about. It’s a strange sort of comfort to recall that thirty-five years ago nearly everyone in Oxford had no idea. But people knew Whitsun was a holiday and had something to do with the Church. Eventually one elderly lady said in a wonderful Oxfordshire accent she thought it was to do with the *“coming of the Holy Ghost”*. What more did she know? After concentrating hard she exclaimed *“he came with a rushing mighty wind”*. Overcome with embarrassment she then burst into fits of laughter. She had no reason to be embarrassed. She’d

remembered one of the most striking features of the day of Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit was dramatic, instant and unmistakable.

I've never forgotten that little excursion into vox pop. People knew next to nothing about the birthday of the Christian Church. Yet Pentecost was the day when the first believers in Christ's resurrection were blown about, fired up and propelled into God's mission. It was from the day of Pentecost that people with no remarkable natural gifts began to speak with a new authority. It was from then on that these same people created a community marked by such mutual love that others remarked upon it. It was from then on that Peter and others who seemed to be timid or cowardly were given new courage and power. In our own day we are called to receive the spirit of God afresh in our lives. The life of the Church today depends still upon the power of the spirit of God. But we've got to be willing to be fired up and blown about. That's why we're here – to be made new and to ask God to let us make others new in our parishes.

St. Paul says to the Christians in Corinth that if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. We're part of the re-creation of God's world which will one day conclude with the establishment of a new Heaven and a new Earth. And the Cross is at the centre. There could be no gift of the Spirit if God in Christ hadn't reconciled us to himself.

It's not the teachings or example of Jesus, wonderful though they are, which lie at the very heart of our mission. It's the death and resurrection of Christ. Proclaiming Christ's reconciling grace was Paul's mission. It's ours still. We are ambassadors for Christ. We work on his behalf. We have no gospel of our own. We are God's servants for Jesus' sake.

Sometime ago I was asked who had taught me most about faith. I owe a huge amount to my parents, to my theological teachers, and to Christian friends at university who influenced me at a crucial time in my life. But there's one person whose sheer enthusiasm for the gospel still humbles me. Everyone should have an Auntie Betty. Mine is nearly 95 years old. She lives alone between Redruth and Camborne in Cornwall. She has moved only once in her life to her present house 100 yards from the one in which she was born. She still goes to the same Methodist chapel where she was baptised ninety-four years ago. She looks after herself. Until recently she was still teaching the children in Sunday school and helping 'the old people' where she lived, most of whom are twenty or thirty years younger than she is.

We always speak quite late on Sunday evenings. I find out what she has thought of the local preacher's sermon that morning. I'm glad she's not here to assess this one. Last year I well remember her asking me one Sunday what I was doing on the

following Thursday. She knew it was Ascension Day. Since she's had a bishop for a nephew she's become quite a High Church Methodist, more familiar with the Church's year than most Anglicans. I told her I was doing a confirmation in a Norfolk village that evening. There were eight candidates. I had their names in front of me on my study desk. She asked for them and wrote their names down. She then said she'd pray for them that night when they were being confirmed. So a rather surprised group of confirmation candidates at a village called Horsford were told by their bishop that there was a Cornish Methodist in her 90s praying for them by name as they were being confirmed. She would be praying that they remain faithful to Christ and that God's Spirit would live in them. I also had to tell them that Auntie Betty wouldn't start praying until 8.00 p.m. when EastEnders had finished. She's a very practical person.

The glory of this is that Auntie Betty is so committed to the growth of Christ's church in her tenth decade that she's keen to pray for those growing in the faith whom she will never meet or see or know. But they are part of the same body of Christ. Hers is the spirit that makes the Church grow. This is the Holy Spirit who inspires. This is the Holy Spirit which blows us about and fires us up so that the world and the Church look more glorious than we can ever imagine. This is all about the drive towards transformation in Christ which changes the world. I hope your Mission Action Plans are grounded in this sort of passionate prayer. Auntie Betty may have left school at

14 over 80 years ago but she knows about the Body of Christ belonging together across space and time – what we call the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. She's no plaster saint. She's got plenty of faults. But she's received the Spirit.

The Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria lived at roughly the same time that Jesus was ministering in Galilee. We reckon Philo was born around 20 BC and died in AD50. He was a philosopher. He believed that a breath of divine spirit lived in everybody. It's what we would now call our inner conscience. He also believed that some people got a second wind from God which might fill them with divine ecstasy. But, said Philo, this was only given to people of exceptional gifts, intelligence and goodness. Pentecost turned Philo's teaching on its head.

The Holy Spirit of God is not given just to those who scale the heights of human goodness. How could it be when you think how those disciples and apostles so often failed Jesus and ran away? No, God's spirit is given to all who respond to the goodness of God and do not trust in their own. The gift of the Spirit was a new source of love and joy, given so that God might draw all humanity to himself.

The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the glory of God in ordinary, daily experiences in the created order around us. That's why we build beautiful churches. That's why we read the scriptures, the inspired word of God. That's why we celebrate the

sacraments, through which God gives us the means of grace. We see life differently and we grow. And others grow with us. The poet Walt Whitman once wrote

“I know nothing else but miracles..... to me every hour of night and day is a miracle”.

We cannot live this new life in Christ simply through our own efforts. St. Paul said that the good things he wanted to do he didn't do and the bad things he tried not to do were the ones he ended up doing. We say things which hurt other people. We easily turn our back rather than turn the other cheek. We need God to help us live differently. It's God's Holy Spirit who can make our dull moral world fizz and sparkle with new life. There was a moving example of this just over a month ago.

Many of you will have heard about a teenager murdered in a bakery in south London. It wasn't in the tough inner city but in a respectable suburb. The young man was just 16 years old and called Jimmy Mizen. He'd only gone with his brother to buy some sausage rolls. He was threatened for no reason. He refused to fight. He was killed by a broken bottle.

Jimmy was a Catholic who served regularly at Mass in his local church. Instinctively he followed the teaching of the Lord of the Eucharist. He'd absorbed what it meant to

love your enemies. He didn't fight so he lost his life. But what impressed me enormously was the reaction of Jimmy's mother. She didn't demand summary punishment for the killer. She said there was too much hate, anger and bitterness in the world. She and Jimmy's family didn't want to add to it. She said she felt sorry for the parents and the family of the young who had killed Jimmy. *"They've got to live with what's gone wrong in him"*, she said *"whereas we can cherish the memory of a wonderful son"*.

How I wish this remarkable witness had achieved front page headlines everywhere. What a difference it would make to a society that grows angrier by the day and where politicians, because of our fallen nature, have to compete to show how tough they are on crime. What I do know is that Jimmy's family responded as they did because the Holy Spirit of God was at work within them. If you heard Jimmy's parents on the BBC Sunday programme last week you would have been moved. Somehow our public life is now so shot through with resentment and conflict that we cannot hear the good news. That's why we need the renewing power of the Holy Spirit more than ever.

Witnesses like the Mizen family to the transforming power of the gospel in human life have been nurtured in ordinary local churches. Sometimes we look at the disordered state of our world and think that what we get up to in church seems trivial, small scale

and lacking impact. Don't believe it. Your worship can and should be transformative. Even that poorly attended bible study, that weekday Eucharist where only two or three gather, that youth event with disappointing numbers, that mother and toddler club that's difficult to sustain – these are the places where the gospel can also be heard and where God's spirit received just as much as in the mega church with the celebrity speaker. What your mission action plans are intended to do is not to make everyone try harder and so increase guilt when success is elusive. No, they're intended to stimulate the parishes here to think of the language and means we use in God's mission and outreach. How can people in our own day hear and respond to the gospel?

God's spirit finds a language that's right for each of us. Some people are brought to God through music whereas others are tone deaf. Some people connect immediately with the word of God in scripture whereas others of equal faith find reading the bible a duty rather than a delight. Some find the sacraments of the Church not just a means of grace but revealing the hope of glory, while others appear to be left cold by the symbols God uses. Art and architecture, poetry and the natural world – there seem to be a host of languages which Christians use to praise God and tell of his name. And when God breaks through, His spirit makes all these other things come alive too. The scriptures begin to speak; the sacraments have new depth. The natural world in all its colour and exuberance seems to be a hymn of praise; the Holy Spirit who brings us

together into the body of Christ addresses us personally. God will find the right language for you, for me, for everyone. Let's have the imagination to recognise the host of languages through which the Holy Spirit speaks.

I've always loved the old story about a young Welsh girl who came to work for a family in London. She was a sort of au pair in the days before they'd invented the term. She travelled across London each Sunday to worship at the Welsh church. Her family only spoke Welsh at home.

She was soon greatly appreciated by the family for whom she worked. They went to their local parish church. One day they invited her to join them. It would save her such a long journey. "No" she said "*I'd rather worship God in the language I love*". "But" her employer said gently, "*Jesus wasn't a Welshman you know*". "*I know that*" she replied, "*but it's in Welsh he speaks to me*".

Your mission action plans are intended to ensure that in the parishes of this diocese God's faithful people hear and speak the language of God's transforming grace. We long for a transformed world. We want God to change people and our society. Our churches, despite all the failures and mistakes we make within them, are communities of transformation. There's nowhere else like them. Treasure them, these storehouses of grace and nurseries of forgiveness. And so I invite each parish to bring their

mission action plan to your bishops. May these plans be presented before God, and dedicated to him as pledges of our response to his love.

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