

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	22 June 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Pentecost Sunday
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, ignite in us your holy fire; strengthen your children with the gift of faith, revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The story is told of a Chinese man who was interested in the Christian Faith. As part of his exploration he read the account of the Baptism of Jesus and was puzzled, so asked his mentor, 'The Father I understand and Jesus Christ his Son, but who is this holy bird?'

Some of us may resonate with that sense of bewilderment. And the account given by Luke of the Day of Pentecost seems disturbing – if we're honest, we're not totally certain we would like to have been there – the sound of a mighty rushing wind; what seemed to be tongues of fire resting on each person and then people beginning to speak in other languages. Imagine if that happened here, today! Not in an English Cathedral surely?

But the night before he died, at the Last Supper, according to John, Jesus spoke extensively about the coming gift of the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, the Paraclete, who would 'abide with us and be in us.' So, in case we're puzzled, like the Chinese man, who is the Holy Spirit? What does He do?

Who is he? In John 14:16 Jesus said, I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of Truth...

The first thing we need to note in answer to the question, 'Who is He?' is the fact that Jesus refers to the Spirit as a gift from God the Father. A little later, Jn 15:26, Jesus describes him as 'proceeding from the Father'. The Holy Spirit is truly God. He is eternal. He was active at the beginning of Creation and he constantly renews the face of Creation. (Ps 104:30)

In the New Testament he is described as both the Spirit of God and also as the Spirit of Christ. That's not something that should confuse us, as here in John 14, Jesus stresses that he and the Father are one, v10 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me?'

Jesus describes himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6) and the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth – he communicates the Truth. He will bear witness to the Truth of who Jesus is and convince people of sin, of righteousness and judgement. In a world where many, like Pilate, ask 'What is truth?' this characteristic of the Holy Spirit is worth pondering.

But the primary name that Jesus gives him, here in John 14, is translated as 'the Advocate'. It's an attempt to translate the Greek word, Paracletos, which does not have an equivalent in English. In Greek it meant someone who was called to stand beside you in court – to be your advocate, your witness – to encourage and exhort you. The old versions of the Bible use 'Comforter' instead -which was fine in Elizabethan English, as that still kept the Latin sense of confortare – to strengthen. Now we think only of comfy blankets and soft toys and the meaning is lost.

But the best explanation I have ever come across, for the meaning of Paraclete, comes from the Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins. He was a fine classicist as well as a great poet and, in a sermon for Pentecost in 1882, wrote this: A Paraclete is one who comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward, who calls on; what the spur and word of command is to a horse, what clapping of hands is to a speaker, what a trumpet is to the soldier, that a Paraclete is to the soul: one who calls us on. That is what it means, a Paraclete is one who calls us on to good. One sight is before my mind.....: you have seen at cricket how when one of the batsmen at the wicket has made a hit and wants to score a run, the other doubts, hangs back, or is ready to run in again, how eagerly the first will cry/Run! Come on, come on! – a Paraclete is just that, something that cheers the spirit of man, with signals and with cries, all zealous that he should do something and full of assurance that if he will he can, calling him on, springing to meet him half way, crying to his ears or to his heart: This way to do God's will, this way to save your soul, come on, come on!'

What does he do? In that brilliant quote we have slipped from answering the question, 'Who is the Holy Spirit' to enquiring as what he does. Because not only does the Spirit exhort and encourage us, St Paul, writing to the Romans tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who makes us children of God; who in effect, to use one of Paul's metaphors for salvation, organises our adoption – who urges

us to pray to God our Father and makes us heirs of an unimaginable, glorious inheritance.

We live in a society that encourages us to think of legacies. We are often asked to include charities, the Cathedral in our wills. Some of us may have benefited from legacies we have received, but I wonder how many of us have ever thought of ourselves as heirs alongside Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit as the pledge, the deposit, to guarantee what is to come.

And how do we know that we have the Holy Spirit? Every nudge to pray, every desire to pour out our longings and cry to our Heavenly Father, comes from the Spirit, Paul tells us.

Finally, as he is the Spirit of God and God is love, he is the one who brings us together. If you love me, you will keep my commandment, says Jesus. And what is Jesus' key, characteristic commandment? It is to love God and to love one another. Just as God the Father and Jesus are one, so the Holy Spirit lives in us and abides in us. He calls us to be united in and with that love the Father and the Son share – to be together as the body of Christ, united in our Head.

Reflecting on Luke's account of the Day of Pentecost, Archbishop Rowan Williams asks, What was going on? Some new kind of human experience, of human togetherness, had suddenly erupted into the world.....a kind of human experience that allowed people to speak to strangers in their own language. Whatever exactly that means...that's what people remembered, suddenly insiders were able to speak to outsiders, suddenly barriers dropped with a great crash.

And this is what we pray for today – for the Holy Spirit to refresh and renew us – to restore our love for God, one another and his world; to revive our desire for prayer and communion with God – to strengthen us, to cheer us, to exhort us – to be our Paraclete.

Come Holy Spirit; ignite in us your holy fire; revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.