

Sermon: Whitsunday 2009...

Today is Whit Sunday. Along with Christmas and Easter, it is one of the chief feast days of the Christian Year. You wouldn't think so in England today where it is hardly noticed since its secularisation into Spring Bank Holiday – which was last weekend, and signified nothing in particular. It's not just the secular realm which has no room for Whitsunday. The Church has abolished it as well and in all the modern Christian diaries and calendars, today gets called Pentecost a feast of the Jews from the Old Testament.

How go-ahead of the modern Church to adopt an anachronism! They do it of course to remove from our minds any connection with how things used to be, with the tradition that sustains us. And the aisle-dancing enthusiasts, tiptoeing around little nightlights on the floor of the sanctuary in their pantomime paganism, have stolen Whitsunday from the Church of England. They claim Pentecostal inspiration only for themselves. You can recognise them by their doggerel, sub-Lloyd-Webber choruses, their overhead projectors, their arm-waving and soapy prayers so arch and creepy they set your teeth on edge; their Noddy versions of the Scriptures and their touchy-feely psychobabble. I have a question for these modern church people: if the Holy Ghost is really supposed to be behind all that performance, why is it so fifth rate?

But in outposts of the Church of England which cling to the remnant of their sanity, today is still Whitsuntide, the birthday of the church. It is the day when the Holy Ghost descended upon the Apostles as a rushing mighty wind and tongues like as of fire. And woke them up.

Most people can hold in their minds some sort of vision of God the Father, and for our pictures of Jesus we have the lovely Gospels. But the Holy Ghost remains vague, indistinct, a bit of a conundrum that you try not to think about – like Transubstantiation and Predestination and Election to Grace or that one of the Table of Kindred and Affinity at the back of the Prayer Book which says a man may not marry his grandmother. Back in St Bartholomew's, Leeds in the 1950s, I and all the other urchins, used to pore over it during the long sermons and think how lucky our granddads were.

So we need to be reminded that the Holy Ghost is God, just as the Father and the Son are God: *consubstantial, coeternal* as we sang for thirteen centuries – until our brainless *New English Hymnal* dumbed it down. So who is the Holy Ghost? What does he do? The job description of the Holy Ghost according to the Creed is *the Lord and giver of life*. If you want some powerful vision of the Holy Ghost go back to the beginning of the Bible and...

...the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters...

And if you really want to get the full juice of the fruit, turn next to Joseph Haydn's miraculous oratorio *The Creation*. It starts with the Bible's representation of the primeval chaos; the music is muddy, vague, all over the damn place, a rambling overture in C-minor with all the cadences lopped off - and then the loud, bright chord of C-major:

And God said, let there be light: and there was light

There is nothing vague or indistinct about the Holy Ghost. His images and representations are wind and fire. Everything he touches is either burned up in Judgement or comes vividly, ecstatically, to life. So with the Apostles in today's lesson. They had been with Jesus for three years. He had taught them and loved them to death, to his own death. He had risen from the dead. Yet the Apostles still didn't get it. They were cowering in an upper room for fear of the authorities. Then suddenly they are out in the street proclaiming the Gospel with *δυναμις* and *ενεργεια* – authority and power.

So ecstatic that many thought they were drunk and raving. But the discerning said: *We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God*. You might think you know things, even spiritual things. But you don't know these things until the Holy Ghost reveals them to you, as it were, from the inside. He makes you to hear *in your own tongue*. This is because you were made by the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the giver of life. And he speaks from within you to your innermost being. Jesus promised that the Holy Ghost would lead us into all truth. The word truth here *αληθεια* means unhiddenness: it means we shall be shown into the very heart of truth. That Greek word for truth is also closely related to the word for poet

For example, you can see the Cross as an instrument of torture, It is the poetry of the Holy Ghost who reveals to you that it is also the Tree of Life. You can see the tomb in the rock merely as a sepulchre. The Holy Ghost shows you it as the gateway to salvation. What the Holy Ghost does is raise our game. The Holy Ghost operates on us, giving us great transplants of reality. Perhaps we can understand this better by looking to artistic inspiration. When you stand before Michelangelo's statue of the Madonna and Child in Bruges, you feel you should kneel. Because the Holy Ghost has inspired Michelangelo with such a chunk of reality that you see not just a representation of the Madonna and Child but something of the Madonna and Child as they are in themselves.

Or to go back to Haydn and *The Creation*. In that sublime music you are actually taken into the very process of creation out of chaos. Or in inspired texts, Shakespeare's *patience on a monument* is not just a metaphor for stillness: it is the very articulation of stillness. As the last movement of Beethoven's *Seventh* is *the apotheosis of the dance*. It is the dance in itself. Inspiration is experience charged with reality to the greatest possible extent.

Here we approach that most enigmatic saying of Our Lord's about the unforgiveable sin – which is the sin against the Holy Ghost. It is unforgiveable only because it is not possible to repent of it. To claim inspiration, to pretend to the real thing when what you're dealing in is dross, reveals a cast of mind which is unable to discern between beauty and ugliness, between truth and lies, between reality and illusion-delusion. So much of our modern world commits the unforgiveable sin every day because it despises quality and worships rubbish. Noise as music. Anti-art as art. Indeed, this sin has raised itself to a terrifying level of blasphemous parody by its denial that there is even a difference between the quality and the rubbish.

So the most desperate prayer is always *Take not thy Holy Spirit from us*

But the Holy Ghost will come to us only if we are willing to receive him and on God's terms: trust, the attempt at obedience, faithfulness. And purity of heart – which means to will *one thing*. The Holy Ghost comes only to the wholehearted. The gift of the Spirit is not an optional extra, an add on:

It is: *the purification of our motive in the ground of our beseeching...a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.*