

Whitsunday 11th May 2009

Today is Whit Sunday, the Festival of the Holy Ghost. We are not to think of the Holy Ghost as some sort of vague influence. The Holy Ghost is the Third Person of the Trinity with the Father and the Son. In St Augustine's beautiful phrase, *He is the love by which the Father loveth the Son and the Son loveth the Father*. Or as Lancelot Andrewes says, *The Holy Ghost is the love-knot of the two Persons, the Father and the Son*.

The Holy Ghost is *The Lord and giver of life*. All life. This is the Spirit of God who *moved upon the face of the waters* in the act of creation. In the Old Testament the Spirit is seen in the desert wind called in Hebrew the *ru'ach*. In the Greek of the New Testament the same word - πνευμα - is used for Spirit as for wind. The desert is flat and quiet when, as from nowhere, there comes a tiny stirring of sand and within minutes the desert is a howling storm. This is the *ru'ach* the Spirit of God. He is the breath of God too. Ezekiel the prophet and *behold a valley of dry bones*.

And the Lord God said unto Ezekiel: *Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God, Come from the four winds O breath and breathe upon these slain that they may live*. And so today we have the *rushing mighty wind*. The Lord and Giver of Life comes in wind and fire and the Apostles speak with tongues of ecstasy. It the reversal of Babel – the restoration to God's people of the power of authentic utterance.

*The dove descending breaks the air with flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare the one discharge from sin and error,
The only hope or else despair lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –
To be redeemed from fire by fire.*

It is terrifying. And it's meant to be terrifying. The Person of the Holy Ghost is always brooding and haunting. His language makes the hair stand out on the back of your neck, as in the prophet Joel's eerie outburst:

*And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and **your young men shall see visions***

The Holy Ghost inspires us as the strange and eerie plainsong line does: *Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire*. And suddenly we are in a Gothic cathedral, sacred stone and glass and the whole undiluted reality of the classical Christian vision of God.

So how does this inspiration work? What is inspiration? It is the Holy Spirit seizing hold of you, your mind and senses, and hurling you directly into the presence of God. It is inspiration, not explanation. It is the spirit, not the letter. As soon as anyone tries to explain the faith to me, I want to be sick. It can't be done. Rather we are seized by the Spirit and *shown*. It is not a matter of explanation at all. It is a matter of entering a world. Inspiration is the poetic evocation of the being of God. That is why it is ecstatic – literally the Holy Ghost takes you outside your normal stance, outside your skin.

Somebody asked Samuel Coleridge – the greatest mind of the early 19th century – to provide some evidences for the truth of the faith. He replied:

Evidences? I am weary of evidences. Only rouse a man and make him feel the truth of his religion But this was no mere subordination of evidence or argument to feelings – and especially not to aesthetic feelings of the kind which George Santayana refers to as *emotional shocks* Rather Coleridge is much closer to Pascal's understanding of feelings and *heart* where Pascal says, *The heart has its reasons which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things*

There are lies, damned lies and then worse things – empiricism and gormless literal-mindedness. Unimaginative. Uninspired. Reality is not completely comprehensible and that is why we can approach it only through the Spirit's inspiration. The Spirit bypasses the pedantic channels of the scribe and the pedagogue, lifts us up, blows us about and deposits us in the heart of God. *Young men see visions and old men dream dreams...the isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not*

God and God's way with the world is a mystery. The Holy Ghost takes us into the heart of that mystery. Once a man has felt the touch of the Holy Ghost, the worst thing he can imagine is that the Spirit will leave him. Look back to the terror in King Saul when he discovered that he had forfeited the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Likewise the Psalmist knows the darkness of loss and emptiness without the indwelling Spirit:

Why art thou so full of heaviness O my soul and why art thou so disquieted within me?

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 to the wholehearted. The gift of the Spirit is not an optional extra, an add on:

It is: *a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything.*

But to be inspired by the Holy Ghost is not what the arm-wavers and aisle-dancers do - a spasm of sub-disco touchy-feeliness. To receive the Holy Ghost we have to be disciplined, attentive and hard-working. The Holy Ghost is the agent behind everything good in human creativity: in art, writing and music; in morals and in theology. But inspiration is not a cop out by which we can avoid hard work and diligence. I got into trouble at Whitsuntide back in 2002 for saying from this pulpit that it was entirely suitable that the Holy Ghost's tongues of fire chose the Eve of this great Festival five years ago to burn down the whole of the Saatchi collection. I will say it again.

The reason we have moral chaos and rubbish masquerading as art comes through the false idea that we can just express ourselves without first rigorously examining the sort of self we want to express. This foolishness extends even into the realms of

theological doctrine. Remember all those bishops who made a living out of denying the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection and of sidelining the doctrine of sin. Remember how the Roman Catholic church threw out the baby with the bathwater at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

There's a nice story. Pope John XXIII arrived at the pearly gates. St Peter said, "You can't come in. I don't know you". Pope John XXIII tells Peter to go and ask God. Well the Father and the Son are busy doing something in the garden. So Peter asks the Holy Ghost and the Holy Ghost says, "Oh yes, I remember that fellow. He was the one who invited me to the Vatican Council – but I didn't go."

Without the true inspiration of the Holy Ghost there is only spiritless, uninspired decadence. And decadence is what we have all over the place in art, morals and theology. We should be warned. For the Holy Ghost is also the whirlwind which will blow all this trash away and its perpetrators with it. The Holy Ghost is the refining fire of judgment. A judgement that will not be long delayed