

## Whitsunday / Pentecost

*Sermon Preached by Anthony Freeman at Holy Cross, Crediton, 23rd May 2010*

Today's collect links the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost — or Whitsunday as we normally call it in England — with the office of teaching: “God, who as at this time taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit.”

At first sight this connection is unexpected. We tend to think of the Holy Spirit working upon the feelings and emotions rather than the intellect; fire to warm the heart, rather than light to instruct the mind. But the same theme of teaching is picked up in this morning's Gospel: “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things” (John 14.26).

When the disciples heard the words “teaching all things”, their thoughts would naturally have turned to the Law of Moses, contained in the first five books of the Bible. For the faithful Jew of their day — as of our own — the Law of Moses, duly interpreted by the rabbis, did contain all God's teaching and covered every aspect of life. So how could Jesus be talking about another source of divine teaching? On the other hand, he himself had given some fairly stunning teaching, and accompanied it by miracles of healing, so that the crowds had been moved to comment that “he taught as one with authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7.29).

Yes indeed. And now Jesus was telling them that because he would not be permanently among them in a physical way, the Father would send the Holy Spirit to take over that work of teaching with authority. The Holy Spirit, filling the hearts and minds of God's people, would take over the role of teaching both from the Jewish Law and from the earthly Jesus. And when was this to happen? Saint John's Gospel tells us that it was on the evening of Easter Day itself, while the disciples were still fearful and hiding away behind locked doors, that the risen Jesus appeared to them and breathed upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit. So why does Saint Luke give us this other, much better known, account of the Holy Spirit descending in a very public way on the Day of Pentecost?

The answer lies in this idea that in the Christian Church the guidance of the Holy Spirit will take over the teaching role hitherto played by the Jewish Law. By New Testament times, the Feast of Pentecost, which had earlier been a harvest festival, had become for the Jews a celebration of the giving of the Law by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. So what better day than this to focus the attention of the infant Christian Church upon the giving to them of the Law's successor, the Holy Spirit?

The details of Luke's dramatic story fit this explanation. According to the Old Testament book Exodus, when Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law, “Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended upon it in fire” (Exodus 19.18). So now, tongues of fire descended upon the apostles as the outward sign of God's coming in the Holy Spirit.

And tongues of a more literal kind were also in evidence: “Devout Jews from every nation under heaven were living in Jerusalem ... and each one heard the apostles speaking in their own native language” (Acts 2.5-6). This also ties in with the giving of the Law to Moses. You won't find anything in the Old Testament itself about different languages being heard when God gave the Law to Moses. But in the cosmopolitan world of first the Greek and then the Roman empires, the Jews found themselves having to defend their claim to be God's chosen people. And one of the arguments the rabbis came up with was to say that in fact God proclaimed his Law in all the languages of the world, but the Jews were the only ones who listened. That was what made them special. This might seem far-fetched to us, but by the time of Jesus, this version of events at Sinai was firmly established among the Jews as “what actually happened”. We might compare the way that the equally unbiblical record of an ox and an ass at the birth of Jesus has become a fixed part of our own Christmas story.

We are not here to sit in judgement upon the historical accuracy of Luke's dramatic story in Acts, as we compare it with John's more domestic account of Jesus giving the Spirit to the disciples on Easter evening. But we can learn from it. I am sure the apostles could not have foretold precisely the form that the giving of the Spirit would take, but given that they were steeped in the Jewish tradition I have outlined, and given the teaching of Jesus on the relationship between the Law and the Spirit, it was at the very least fitting that Pentecost, fire, and the hearing of the message in every language, should come together in this way to mark the event.

To put it another way, they could not have predicted it in detail, but they were expecting something to happen, and when this did happen, they could recognise it for what it was.

So it is with us. We cannot foretell exactly how God will act in our own lives, or when and where we shall become conscious of the guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit. But like the apostles we should have an expectation that something will happen. In particular we should have an expectation that when we gather here together, to hear the Word and break the bread — which together make up our spiritual food — that this is at the very least a fitting occasion for him to speak to us; and never more so, perhaps, than on this day when we specially recall that first Whitsunday, the first Christian Pentecost.

So let's resolve this morning to come with hearts and minds open and receptive to God the Holy Spirit, and pray that he will indeed teach us all things and lead us into all truth. Amen.