

Sermon Notes for Whitsun

they were all filled with the Holy Ghost (lesson)

I feel Whitsun as a judgement on myself and the Church. We “are not as pious as the primitive Christians were” (William Law) and this is obvious in the gifts we do *not* have. Not particularly a failure to speak in other tongues; the Church has a good record in learning the languages of the people it encounters and making the Gospel available to them, not by miracle but by hard work. But the various tongues at Pentecost is only a sign, however important. The heart of the mystery lies in the preaching and converting, not in the languages used. The judgement on us is that we do not proclaim the Gospel, or the Holy Spirit does not use us to do so. We know the practical restrictions imposed by employment; it is dangerous even to be known as a Christian, much more if we talk about it. And much the same applies in wider society. I cannot be confident that these excuses will work on the Day of Judgement. In so far as God does not use us, we do not know his purposes. It might be that the Church in Western Europe and some other places has been so corrupted that God must destroy and replace it; but we do not *know* this. Prophecy as a current gift (the declaring of God's hidden purposes) is not taught or expected in theological colleges!

If this is a harsh judgement, it is only the same as George Herbert proclaimed just before the destruction of the Church of England by the military dictatorship. His poem for this feast observes that the gifts have been withdrawn for our failings; his poem on the “progress” of religion has it about to leave England for (of all places) the American colonies. One can only conclude that the more faithful the observer, the more faults are recognised. But we cannot avoid the facts. Some proclaim an unbalanced gospel; some a false gospel; some avoid error by silence. Many are just silent. Why should God bless us with his Spirit? Not for our merits, certainly, then or now. Herbert's analysis owes much to Ezekiel. The Spirit is no longer seen in the dramatic actions of Acts, but

Thou shutt'st the doore, and keep'st within;
Scarce a good joy creeps through the chink:
And if the braves of conqu'ring sinne
Did not excite thee, we should wholly sink.

If there is any of the life of the Blessed Trinity in us, it is because God, from respect for his own holy name, will not let sin wholly triumph in us.

This is sobering. Even if we thought God had no use for us, we should still try to worship him rightly both in prayer and in actions; for surely the tempter would have us despair. We cannot *know* that the Spirit has forsaken us for ever. In John Bunyan's “Holy War” the town of Mansoul is, as a consequence of practical apostasy, left without the comfort of the Holy Spirit in the face of attack from Satan's army of Doubters. But all the time the Spirit is present and, once there is true repentance, will join his prayers to those of Mansoul so that deliverance is received. This is only an allegory of Bunyan's own spiritual experience as recorded in “Grace abounding to the chiefest of sinners”. He thought he had committed the “unforgivable sin” by rejecting God after enlightenment; eventually he received the blessed truth that the only unforgivable sin is persistence in despair. Mercy is shown to all those who seek it. “He that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out.” Probably our situation is worse than we can realize; only when delivered, if even then, will we know how bad it was; but that does not change how we should pray and act.

Whitsun is still good news. Not because this is the time in the year for recovery; all times are alike to God. But because this is a time suggested to us by the practical wisdom of the Church to reflect on what gifts we received in baptism – God's presence and his very self – and to stop hindering him in his work within us. We cannot force God. We do not need to. His will is our salvation, and however much we have neglected Him, yet we can turn to him and be healed. The Gospel promise is that the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, will abide with you for ever. If these are dark days for the Church (and not just for our little body) that does not mean that it is impossible to be faithful.

Lord, though we change, thou art the same;
The same sweet God of love and light:
Restore this day, for thy great name,
Unto his ancient and miraculous right.