

*“the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name”* (Gospel).

I might have done worse than to repeat last year's sermon, for the gospel truths do not change. The Holy Ghost is not essentially about occasional spectacular incidents like speaking in tongues (granted he may give such gifts to some) but about the way we are caught up into the life of the Blessed Trinity. You simply cannot have the Father for your creator unless you have the Son for your redeemer and the Holy Spirit pouring the very life of the Godhead into you so that you can respond as a Christian. (And when you have all this, it will not usually be obvious to you, though God will show his hand when he chooses.) Even this is an approximation; there are not three gods with three different activities towards us, but one God active alike in creation, redemption and sanctification.

To the extent that St. John thinks there is a special work of the Spirit, it is to bring Jesus' teaching to the remembrance of the disciples. There was, of course, no New Testament for them to read! They were human, with all our strengths and weaknesses of memory. But the Spirit is not just a way of reinforcing memories - else why bother now we have the books? The task for the disciples, before writing anything down, was to distil several years' experience of Jesus into an organised appreciation of his words and deeds, which they could live out and share with others.

You may be called to study the Scriptures, and to receive God's blessings by so doing. You are certainly called to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13.14 and other passages) for which the prerequisite is that the Spirit should form the knowledge of Jesus in you (not a list of facts, but the experience of a person). Bodily, he could be present only to a few, and only from time to time; by the Spirit, to us all and always.

The reading from Acts perhaps suggests (and has certainly been used to suggest) that all Christians are called to be street preachers. It is not quite like that. The hearers were all Jews, or at least believers - so for them the message was not so much utterly new and unfamiliar as that the Promise had turned into present experience. The Apostles were witnesses to this in a way which nobody subsequently could be. We do not learn from this reading how to proclaim Christ to that vast majority in this country who have lost all the clues. When I hear street preachers in Cambridge market pouring out a series of Protestant slogans, they might as well be speaking in tongues for any hope that passers-by (other than myself) will understand. Yes, but how small a thing it is to realise that one method does not work; how much harder, yet how much more important, genuinely to share the Christian life with another person.

I do believe that all Christians have this vocation (whenever God gives us an opening). For is it not inherent that “freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10.8)? God shares his life with us; I doubt the obligation to preach at people (outside Church), but when the opportunity is given to us, we must share with others what we have received - for those are the terms on which we were welcomed into the life of the Trinity. What we have received, and so what we must share, is not theological slogans (even if correct) but God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But to share we must first receive. Yes, we all received the Holy Spirit in our Baptism, and we each personally accepted life with the Holy Trinity in our Confirmation; but it is always right to pray to God that he will perfect his gifts in us.

*The sermon is based on the readings for the feast*