



Br Stuart for Pentecost (2021)

As Abbot Thomas reminded us at Choir Practice yesterday, tomorrow we go back to 'ordinary time'. Since Ash Wednesday in mid-February we have been first in Lent and then until Compline tonight in Eastertide. Ash Wednesday and Pentecost are like the bookends.

On Ash Wednesday we were marked with the sign of the Cross in ash to remind us of our mortality, our sinfulness and our inability to entrust ourselves completely to God: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ."

On Easter morning we recalled our baptism, when we were signed with the Cross and made members of Christ's mystical body, and we renewed our baptismal vows to allow the Risen Christ to live in us and us to live in him.

And now we come to Pentecost, and once again the Church suggests that we mark this remembrance of the apostles being anointed by the Spirit by allowing ourselves to be anointed with the holy oil of Chrism in the sign of the Cross, re-consecrating ourselves to growing in the Christ-life.

It seems particularly poignant this year as we begin to come out of this prolonged period of lockdown to re-commit ourselves again – as we do at the start of each new year in the Covenant Service – to our vocation as Christ's disciples.

At her coronation Queen Elizabeth was anointed with the oil of Chrism, consecrating the rest of her life to the service of God and her people, not knowing what that would entail or for how long it would be.

At the Blessing of a new abbot or abbess in our community they too are anointed with the oil of Chrism as they shoulder what feels like a humanly impossible task, being consecrated to the service of God and the Community, not knowing what this will entail. In my years as abbot there were many times when, on the point of despair, I looked at my hands and remembered the anointing at my Blessing, remembered that my life was consecrated to God and to the service of the Community, and that with that consecration comes the promise of God's grace - if only I would accept it ... and don't we end each Office with the prayer: "May the Divine help remain with us always, and with our absent brothers and sisters". So easy to say it without thinking about its meaning.

We don't know what the future holds for any of us – as individuals or as a community – and when we don't know, the temptation is usually to head for the safety of the familiar, for what we assume is the 'normal'.

Peter said, "I'm going fishing," and the other disciples said that they would go with him. They had no thought that Pentecost was just round the corner and their lives were about to be turned up-side down and inside out as they were sent out to bring the Gospel to the rest of the world. The Holy Spirit tends to blow us out of our comfort zone and have to rely on Grace.

One thing we do know is that none of us are the same as we were 18 months ago and that the pandemic has laid bare many of the inadequacies, injustices and corruptions in society the world over- and in the scandal and spiritual poverty of the fragmented Church. While some have exploited the pandemic for their own ends, others have got the bit between their teeth to build a renewed society – a healthier, global paradigm, and those who are spiritually aware have an important role to play in this.

"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify..." So we have just heard in the Gospel reading. "You also are to testify" – by the quality of our community life and as individuals... "To have the courage to reach the outskirts that need the light of the Gospel so that people may have life," as Pope Francis said in his encyclical, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

When the clergy of the Stepney Area in London met the week before last they articulated three 'aspirations': Confident discipleship, Compassionate Community and Creative growth. As I listened to the speakers and discussions I thought that we, too, might share their aspirations: Confident discipleship, Compassionate community and Creative growth.

As a Community, we have no idea what God will ask of us as the new town is built around us. When we look back over Benedictine history, we see how communities have been led to express the monastic charism in very different ways according to the needs of the time. What is vital is that our ears are attuned to the Holy Spirit, and that we ask for the grace to become ready and able to pray with integrity, as we do in the Covenant Service each year, the lovely prayer of Charles de Faucould we heard at supper on Friday evening:

"My Father, I abandon myself to you. Make of me what you will. Whatever you make of me, I thank you. I put my soul into your hands, I give it to you, Lord, with all the love in my heart, because I love you, and because it is for me a need of love to give myself, to put myself into your hands unreservedly, with infinite trust. For you are my Father."

It is an aspiration to be able to do this, but I suspect the reality is that we all need a huge amount of help from the Holy Spirit in order to be able to do it – and this is what we see when we ponder the story of what happened to the Twelve at Pentecost. And as I was thinking about this an email dropped into my inbox – a quotation from William Johnston about the growth of the Christian mystical life, very much in the tradition of St Theresa, and I leave you with it:

Christian mystics speak of Christ growing within them to such an extent that they can say that “it is not I who see but Christ who sees through my eyes; He listens through my ears; He speaks through my lips; He blesses with my hands; He loves through my heart. Christian mysticism is not a looking at Christ and an imitation of him, but a transformation into Christ.”