

Pentecost Sunday (Year A): The ‘birthday’ of the Christian Church.

1st Reading: Acts 2:1-11: That day’s events described by the author (Luke);

2nd Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:3-7+12-13: The difference the Spirit makes;

Gospel: John 20:19-23: Easter Sunday; Jesus promises the Spirit.

Supporters of Newcastle United are now rejoicing that their club will be playing in the Champions League next season – the European peak of the sport. (Mind, this was after a draw last Monday!) The late Pope St John Paul II (a good goal-keeper in his youth), once said: “Of all the non-important things in life, football is the most important.” I think that what he was getting at was that for sports fans, football raises a sense of identity, a huge community involvement, fierce & passionate noise, and so on. It leads to emotional highs and lows, tapping into some of our most basic human instincts.

Why mention this in a piece about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Because, I suspect, the relationship we have with the Church is in some ways like a fan’s relationship with a team or club he/she supports. There is an emotional bond, linked with some knowledge and beliefs about the team. Football (and other sports) fans (1) ‘believe’ in their team; (2) ‘worship’ in the sense of going to matches (or at least following the results!) - two of the three elements of any religion. What is missing is the 3rd element: how this “belief” in the team affects their moral behaviour in ordinary life. All humans have their faults & weaknesses, but when religious people behave very badly, everyone wonders how real their faith has been. No-one says that about sports fans. When fans (especially in poorer urban areas) say on TV: “football is my religion”, I see what they mean, but in reality, it’s not true.

In this Sunday’s 2nd reading (from 1st Corinthians 12), St Paul talks about the difference the Holy Spirit makes to the church community as a whole, and to you and me as individuals. First, being able to believe in Jesus as our “Lord” is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. This has to be a personal thing, and it’s what happened to the people in Jerusalem when the apostles spoke to them on the day of Pentecost. After that, the Holy Spirit offers “gifts” to us to help us to do what God wants. Different people have different interests and abilities, but St Paul feels that the Holy Spirit helps us to use these for the sake of God’s whole community – the Church. Yes, we may all have different personalities, but the Holy Spirit harnesses these for the sake of everybody. This assumes we have good will and generosity – traits not always found in partisan sports fans!

How far do feelings come into this? As I said above, there must be a ‘personal’ side to religious belief. As we grow into adult life, we become more aware of ourselves as individuals, with our own style, interests, abilities, and so on. It’s at this level that we begin to work out for ourselves the faith that we’ve grown up with in our family – either it becomes part of who I am, or it falls away, sometimes (but not always) for good. Some have a much more intense feeling about this than others – it depends on their personality. If that feeling is in favour of religion, then all and good; if it’s against religion (and sadly, that’s a very common adolescent experience these days), then it makes it unlikely that the person will willingly practise the faith. The Holy Spirit helps, encourages and nourishes religious faith, but doesn’t force it on to people. Again, in today’s first reading, we can see the crowd’s reaction to the apostles on Pentecost Day – many were convinced; others saw them as sad drunks.

The fact that you’re reading this via the Hexham group of parishes website or email suggests that you have some interest in what faith means to people – otherwise, why would you want to read it? (Unless you’re absolutely desperate for something to do!) If you’re a regular, worshipping member of a parish, then that is the work of the Holy Spirit; if you’re just interested in what’s going on, then feel welcome – that’s how the Spirit starts to attract people to the life of faith. Sometimes, this leads to becoming part of a faith community; sometimes it doesn’t. What I am trying to say is that the Holy Spirit is at work, unheard, unseen, in the most intimate aspects of our lives. Its presence is everywhere, and it achieves its purpose of inspiring and motivating by many means – nearly all of them involving people like you and me meeting others.

At a world level, the RC Church, with its world-wide membership, carries on what the apostles started that day in Jerusalem. Other Christian churches, too, do their share in Jesus’ work of evangelization. The “gift of tongues” is perhaps best seen now at a televised Mass in St Peter’s Square in Rome: people of every race, nation and language all together. Prayers and readings are done in many different “tongues” – languages - to help as many as possible follow it. We are part of this vast throng of people. The Spirit makes it all “work” – but that same Spirit also has to start by inspiring faith at the grass-root level - in individuals, just like you and me. Happy birthday, Church! *Fr Jim Dunne.*