

Archdeacon of Dudley's Charge 2019

1 Corinthians 3:9-23

On Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the day on which the promised Holy Spirit was poured out on God's people. With Christians around the world, from all denominations, we rejoiced at that gift, and many of us did so in the context of events bringing to a climax a season of prayer as part of Thy Kingdom Come. I love Pentecost, and have cheated a little in this service, using some of the liturgy and readings which were part of Thy Kingdom Come, because I believe it is always good to ask for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, taking every opportunity to so, and we are still in the right week!

Hence, at the start of this eservice, we prayed that "by the power of the Holy Spirit we may give ourselves to the service of God." We asked God's Spirit "to come down upon us to set us free to sing God's praise for ever and ever. We have just sung about the yearning of our heart and souls to be the place of grace wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling. Our reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminded us that we are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in us, because we belong to Christ.

Our soul, our heart, our inner being, this is somehow the place inhabited by God, through his Spirit in each of us, to the extent we are willing to receive that gift of grace, filling us, refreshing us, resourcing us, renewing us. Yet we so often forget that, and don't stop to receive, perhaps because we are often doing so much for God and his church that we forget to meet with him as his church.

I heard about an archaeologist who once hired some Inca tribesmen to lead him to an archaeological site deep in the mountains. After they had been moving for some time the tribesmen stopped and insisted they would go no further. The archaeologist grew impatient and then angry. But no matter how much he cajoled the tribesmen would not go any further.

Then all of a sudden the tribesmen changed their attitude. They picked up the gear and set off once more. When the bewildered archaeologist asked why they had stopped and refused to move for so long, the tribesmen answered, “We had been moving too fast and had to wait for our souls to catch up.”

“We had been moving too fast and had to wait for our souls to catch up.” These words were not used exactly by any of the church wardens I met in the visitations, but I think it’s fair to say that there was from many a feeling of weariness, people tired and sometimes a bit frazzled from the sheer volume of stuff that church officers these days have to do, coupled with the many other things you all choose to do, because you are passionate about seeing God’s kingdom come in your churches and love getting involved in many aspects of ministry.

We had some interesting conversations about our question in the Articles of Enquiry around whether there was anything the PCC felt God was calling them to stop doing, because 95% of the answers were some form of ‘no!’, and the few that weren’t, were mainly a rueful wish that they could stop doing admin and paperwork! Friends, churches are not very good at stopping anything, laying things down, creating some space. We get very enthusiastic about starting new ministries to reach new people, draw in young families, reach out to the lonely elderly folk in our communities, which is great, but we don’t take time to stop and consider what else might need to be dropped to free up the time, energy and resources for the new thing. So the faithful few do ever more, ever faster, getting ever more frazzled, drying up and burning out.

Stopping to let our souls catch up gives us time to reflect on whether too much stuff is crowding out the space for the Spirit in our lives and churches, to ask whether the good has become the enemy of the best. Our bodies are holy temples for the Holy Spirit. We function best when we are filled with the Spirit. When we run on empty, we are not living as we were created to live, and it doesn’t often end well. The Holy Spirit is for life, not just for Pentecost!

We need to get better at stopping, individually and corporately. You will all be aware of the financial difficulties we are facing now and into the future, like many other dioceses. These are difficulties we are in together, and we need to face them together, as a wider church family – no us and them. As posts are inevitably cut centrally and across the diocese over the coming years, we will have to carefully and prayerfully assess what that means in terms of where we focus, what we can do, and what we can no longer do. Expecting to do the same, or more, without making changes in how we do ministry and mission will result in souls being left behind, so we need to be wise and creative in our reimagining, and have a culture that allows things to stop, and that not feel like failure. We need a culture with rhythms of grace, that allows people to stop, ad rest, and receive, as well as serve and give.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians makes it clear that belonging to Christ, being church, involves work – of course it does! He says ‘we are God’s servants, working together’. But he goes on to write that he works, “according to the grace of God given” to him, and then infers that wise working, building God’s way, will have Christ as its foundation and will be best undertaken by those who are temples of the Holy Spirit. Even when life feels hard, as of course it sometimes does, even if we feel overwhelmed by the challenges ahead, we can take great encouragement from Jesus’ promise to send us the Holy Spirit to guide, equip and comfort us, and the knowledge that we can draw on God’s overflowing grace. The life that Jesus offers to those who follow him is one of generous abundance, of more than enough. It is the offer of a life of contentment, peace and satisfaction. of purpose and fulfilment, of measured pace, because it is the offer of grace.

I am reading a wonderful book at the moment recommended to me by Brother Stuart at Mucknell. *Grace on the journey to God* by Michael Casey is a book to be savoured, read slowly and prayerfully. In an early chapter Casey reflects that the spiritual journey requires more than an understanding of theology, it requires an understanding of humanity too. I was struck by this as I reflected on what it means to receive life in abundance and live it at a sustainable pace. Casey writes:

“It is not enough to know about grace we must also have a sympathetic understanding of the recipient of grace. We need to appreciate how the transcendent reality of divine grace interacts with the workaday reality of the human condition, since whatever is received is received in the measure of the receiver. Grace itself is limitless; any restrictions come from the side of the receiver, that is, from us. Grace as it is received is often less complete than grace as it is given.”

Jesus came that we might have life in abundance, limitless grace, but for so many of us, so much of the time, life is lived at less than this fullness. Our spiritual journey must in some way involve us discovering at ever deeper levels what it means to be a recipient of God’s grace without restriction, and of the Holy Spirit

To have “a sympathetic understanding of the recipient of grace”, we need to better understand ourselves, and the barriers we erect around our lives, in order that they might be removed. Then God can come to us more fully. It’s perhaps about being content to be who we were made to be, living life simply and freely, receiving our daily bread with gratitude and enjoying the present moment, trusting we will know the voice of God guiding and calling us to do the right things at the right time. Having settled souls perhaps means having a level of trust in our ability to recognise God’s voice, built by strengthening our relationship with him, so that we walk contentedly on the path he leads us, at the pace he sets, doing the things he calls us to, empowered by the Holy Spirit rather than doing them in our own strength.

Grace is given, the Holy Spirit is given, that we might live life fully as God’s kingdom people, together as his church being agents of blessing in the world. I sense that as we journey together into the next season of life in the Diocese of Worcester, we will need grace in abundance, and the Holy Spirit refreshing us daily, and am thankful that this is on offer, if we but learn how to receive in healthy measures.

Church wardens, you are temples of God's Holy Spirit and you belong to Christ – never forget that! All of us, whether here as wardens, clergy, PCC or congregation members, are God's servants, working together, according to the grace given us, according to the grace we receive. Let's ensure we take care of each other as we work together, let's not leave our souls behind, let's discern together what's right to do, and what's not, and let's daily ask for that infilling and empowering of the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us in our inner being as we pray and work for God's kingdom to come.