

## Whitsunday – 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

Psalm 104, Joel 2: 21 - 32 and Romans 8: 19 - 27

*You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.* Psalm 104: 4

*Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.* Joel 2: 28

*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God .... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.* Romans 8: 19 and 22

*God, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.* Collect for Whitsunday

Two thoughts about Creation: the first is the stunning pictures that have come back from Mars of the planet's barren surface from the current NASA space probe and the Perseverance rover. While undoubtedly amazing to see the pink rocks, sand and mountains – and to reflect that this planet was also created by God – it contrasts dramatically with the verdant beauty of our own Earth. It reminds us of the miracle of life sustained by the right environment that God chose for his experiment in creating a populated world of beings who could commune with Him. That this perfect environment so quickly found itself stained by sin is the story that runs through the whole Bible. The second thought arises from the recent funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh, where he chose an unfamiliar passage from Ecclesiasticus 43 as the first reading, where it ended in verse 26 with the words: 'By his own action he achieves his end, and by his word all things are held together'. Unfortunately, Huw Edwards on the BBC afterwards seemed to miss the point of the passage by thinking purely in terms of Prince Philip's concern for the environment, whereas the passage speaks powerfully of God as the author and sustainer of creation, and must have been in his mind when it was chosen. It was another example of Prince Philip's self-effacement where the funeral service pointed so strongly to God and less on the individual being committed to Him.

These thoughts are by way of introduction to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Old Testament has periodic examples of people who were endued with the Spirit of God for particular purposes or times. We see it regularly with the prophets, being given insights and visions they could not have had in their own power. The prophet Joel speaks in the well-known verse quoted (2: 28) of a future time when young people would prophesy and old men dream dreams, predicting a more widespread and general working of the Holy Spirit.

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The reason this verse is so well known is that Peter quoted it in Acts 2: 17 – 21, which was read in churches this morning to celebrate Pentecost.

All this was to become possible because Jesus had come to earth to finally right the wrong of sin, in answer to the groaning of creation waiting for that day to come. This is a good reminder that creation around us is not passive or totally inanimate, but shouts out to God in praise (as we see from time to time in the Psalms) or in anguish, as Paul speaks of in Romans 8. For some reason our reading starts at verse 19, when if you read verse 18 it provides the context for what follows. Paul is speaking about present-day suffering as being something of little significance when contrasted with the wonder of glory about to be revealed. It is interesting to cast our minds back nearly two thousand years to Paul's experience, as he saw the daily power of the Holy Spirit in miraculous ways – such as prison doors being opened, and the most unlikely characters coming to faith. He was writing in expectation that this unfolding of the Spirit would continue, as indeed it has. Looking from our perspective we can give thanks for the many millions of people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ because of the dangers faced by the Apostles and subsequent generations.

Paul is writing when only the first phase of this mission was beginning, as creation was watching for the children of God to be revealed. Paul wrote with realism, acknowledging that, although sin had been conquered on the cross, the after-effects of a partially redeemed world would linger. So it is that we continue to see suffering and reflect on the groaning (disappointment?) of creation still waiting to be set free from the bondage of decay (verse 21). While creation does rejoice at the expansion and success of God's kingdom in winning lost souls, there is still much to do, as we wait for the completion of all things and for God's appointed time for Jesus to return and finally bring liberation and a renewed world.

Paul's whole attitude was reaching forward, eager to complete his work. In the latter part of our reading, Paul recognises our comparative weakness (to temptation, and in energy and perseverance), but gives us reassurance in verse 26 that the Holy Spirit is there to help us in our weakness. This was precisely what Jesus spoke about in some of our recent readings from John 14 and 15, where he spoke of the coming Holy Spirit as our Helper and Advocate. On this Pentecost in 2021 we are one year nearer the time when a line will be drawn in time, and Jesus will come as judge. We rejoice in our salvation and gives thanks that Jesus kept that promise to send the Holy Spirit, who is alive and active in the world and in our own lives. Also, it is a nice thought that we are harnessed and in tune with creation in that fellow-yearning for everything to be completed and made perfect.

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