

HOMILY PENTECOST 190609 SW3

Yesterday was Her Majesty the Queen's official birthday. Celebrated with traditional ceremonies: Trooping the Colour on Horseguards Parade, gun salutes in Green Park and at the Tower of London, and the finally the appearance of the royal family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, it has all the trappings of the sort of occasion that is typically British.

Today we celebrate the birthday of the Church. So, in a way this is our birthday. Yes, we are the Church, we – all of us sitting here – , are part of God's gift to humanity. It is in and through the Church that God continues to make manifest his love for humanity. And it all started on the first Pentecost. A group of men and women hiding away from the Jews. Yes, Jesus was risen and they had seen him, but they weren't at all keen on being out and about on the streets. They were known to have been disciples and therefore under suspicion for allegedly having stolen his body to back up their fantastical story of him rising from the dead. In the eyes of the people around them they were either fanatics or fantasists.

Then something happened. Something they themselves found hard to find the language to describe. "Tongues of fire", like flames hovering over their heads, and a rushing of wind. Even more remarkable was the effect, they were fearless, so bold they went outside to tell everyone about Jesus. The cowards became the bravest, Peter was pre-eminent in preaching about this man who had been crucified and dead, who was now alive.

Going back for a moment to the Queen's Birthday celebrations. You know there's one thing I particularly like about the way they show the Trooping of the Colour on TV these days. The commentators are at pains to make it clear that these same soldiers who parade in their fine red uniforms and bearskins hats could possibly be on active service in a few weeks. They are not parade ground mannequins, they are real soldiers. They are sent abroad, they'll have to go on missions into places that might well be deadly hostile.

So, we too, as members of the Church, all of us, we have a mission. We are sent out, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the same spirit as came upon Peter and the other disciples at Pentecost. Yes, we may feel inadequate, we may feel unsure, uncertain. What are we to say? How are we to get out point across without sounding like idiots?

Well that's exactly how they felt, the first disciples, and they didn't always get it right. They had their defeats, just like even the best soldiers. Our history as the Church, like military history, it's not always about victories.

Remember how recently we had the D Day anniversary celebrations. But listening to those old men, I was struck by how many of them saw D Day as the payback for Dunkirk. In fact for some, the most motivating factor that empowered them and propelled them to victory was the terrible defeat they had suffered.

So it is for the Church. In recent years we have suffered real defeats, been let down by leaders we trusted, and witnessed terrible betrayals of confidence. As individuals too, we may have had

moments of weakness, moments when we have not matched up to the standards to which we aspire.

And then we remember the promise Jesus made, that he would be with us always. Then we remember the way in which the Holy Spirit has worked in the Church in the past. Perhaps we might think back to how bad things were in the Church in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the Borgias for instance, the outright buying and selling of all that Church held holy.

Yet out of that morass, that cesspit, came, surely but slowly, a reform, a counter-reform, and then the glories of the renaissance, and with that was a rebirth, not only of art and architecture, but, - and much more importantly - of spirituality and the missionary life of the Church. St Philip Neri, St Ignatius, St Francis Xavier, all men of the Spirit, all standard bearers for a Christianity that had rediscovered its sense of direction, its true sense of purpose.

All this was the work of the Holy Spirit, at work in those who prayed for and wanted to revive the gifts that God so wants to give. This Holy Spirit can help us overcome, indeed defeat all, all, ALL the enemies of all that is true and beautiful.

So let us pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Think of people you know, situations you are acquainted with, and pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pray for the young people who are growing up in a world that seems to have forgotten God, pray for priests and preachers, teachers and all those who bring healing to our suffering world. Pray for peacemakers and those who work for reconciliation, both in families and in our communities.

Let us all pray: "Come Holy Spirit, and renew the face of the earth!"

Canon Paschal Ryan

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