

**May I speak in the name of the living god,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Today on the 50th day after our celebration of the Resurrection of Christ, we remember and give thanks for the way in which the gift of the Holy Spirit lifted the spirits of the disciples and transformed them from a small band of frightened individuals into ambassadors of Christ, who would take the Gospel message to the ends of the known world at that time, even if it meant persecution and death for them, or others close to them.

It is clear from the Acts of the Apostles, - not just our reading today, but the whole account of the birth of the Christian Church, that it was the gift of the Holy Spirit, that inspired, directed and guided the followers of Christ at every turn and drew others into their fellowship. Quite simply, without the Holy Spirit, there would be no church today.

The wonderful truth is that we too, can know the same courage, strength and guidance through the gift of the Holy Spirit, if only we would open our hearts to it.

The problem is that we and society at large, are sometimes uncomfortable about talking about the Holy Spirit. The idea of an invisible force outside us, which directs and controls us, is one which many people find it difficult to understand or accept – things haven't really changed much in 2000 years – many in the crowds then, assumed that the disciples must be drunk.

However, we do freely acknowledge the importance of our own spirit – this is evident from the number of every day expressions that we use, which include the word “spirit.”

For instance we talk about someone being low in spirit, or being high in spirit.

We talk about someone approaching a task in the right spirit, or the wrong spirit.

We talk about a person giving a spirited performance.

We talk about someone having a joyful spirit, or a generous spirit.

We talk about crushing someone's spirits.

These are just a few examples of expressions which acknowledge the importance of the spirit to us.

The human spirit can be very strong, but it can also be very fragile. We have the ability to ascend to the heights and also to plumb the depths. The human spirit can easily be broken or crushed, with very damaging effects.

The bush people of Africa, were the first to inhabit that great continent. However, down the centuries, they suffered persecution at the hands of both white and black people. Today there is only a small remnant remaining in southern Africa, in and around the Kalahari desert. They are used to living in wide open spaces – most of us would probably find the vast and harsh desert environment unbearable – but for the bush people, it is their life and their breath.

There is an account of one occasion when a bushman was imprisoned for killing a giant bustard, which is a protected species. Locked up in a small cell, the man began to waste away, He had plenty of food and drink, and yet, he proceeded to just fade away. Puzzled and alarmed the authorities called a doctor to examine him – but he could find nothing physically wrong with him.

When the Doctor asked him why he was ill, the man replied: “ I cannot live without being able to see the sun go down over the Kalahari Desert.”

I hope that the authorities found a way to release him. His problem was not a lack of food and drink, but a lack of nourishment for his spirit. It was his spirit, not his body that was dying.

Because the human spirit is so easily broken, it needs nourishing and strengthening just as much as the body.

What are some of the things that strengthen and nourish the spirit? What is it that causes the spirit to sink and what enables it to soar?

Sadness weighs it down – joy lifts it up

Criticism erodes it – praise builds it up

Failure shrinks it – success encourages it

Despair causes it to wilt – hope breathes new life
into it

Rejection wounds it – acceptance heals it

Hatred poisons it – love purifies it

Fear cripples it – prayer strengthens it.

If we acknowledge all of this, why should we then be afraid to talk about the Holy Spirit?

For if we open our hearts, it is indeed the Holy Spirit that continually breathes new life into our spirits.

The Holy Spirit has a power far beyond our own power, because it is from God. It enables us to see things, to do tasks and face up to challenges that we could never do in our own strength alone.

Just as it was the Holy Spirit, that guided the early Christians in their reading of scripture and prayer, as they sought to discern God's Will for them – it is the Holy Spirit that guides us today, as we make decisions about the life of our church – whether here locally, or in the context of the Diocese or worldwide Anglican Communion.

Just as it was the Holy Spirit that opened the eyes of the early Christians to the needs of those around them and moved them to respond by distributing money and food amongst the poor – it is the Holy Spirit that stirs our hearts and the hearts of those working with Christian Aid and other relief agencies, when we hear of disasters around the world.

Last week was Christian Aid Week – it is a good time to give thanks for the way in which they and their supporters have taken practical help to hundreds of thousands of people living in well over 60 of the poorest countries in the world; and the way in which they and their supporters have spoken out against injustices in global trading and financial systems with the result that significant proportions of third world debt has been cancelled and fair trade goods are now increasingly mainstream. These are giant tasks – in which the human spirit would have failed long ago – but with the help of the Holy Spirit, things which to us seem impossible, can and do happen.

Just as the Holy Spirit gave the early Christians the courage to spread the Gospel message, despite the very real physical dangers they faced through persecution and imprisonment, it is the same Holy Spirit that inspires us and enables us to stand firm in our faith, even when we come under attack from Richard Dawkins, or others who question the basis of our faith -

To me it makes much more sense to believe in a God who has made us, and loves us and has a plan for us, and over the course of time has shaped the world, not just through the forces of nature, but through the influence of his Spirit – than to believe that you and I and everything around us is the result of a random accident?

Just as it was the Holy Spirit that enabled Saul to see the error of his ways in persecuting the early church; and enabled Peter to see that the love of God made known in Christ was freely offered to the gentiles as well as to the Jews - it is the same Holy Spirit that challenges us, and helps us to see new possibilities not just in our lives, but in the life of the world. It is the Holy Spirit which takes us beyond our own limited perspective on things, and invites us to share in God's vision for the world.

Just as the Holy Spirit enabled the first disciples to speak of God's love in languages that could be understood by everyone in the crowds in Jerusalem, it is the Holy Spirit which enables us to share the Gospel message in ways which are meaningful for people today. Over the years I have gone to Sandown Park near Esher – not for the horse racing, I hasten to add - but for the Christian Resources Exhibition – which is wonderful display and celebration of the many ways in which the Gospel can be put into practice and shared.

However, all of that would be meaningless, without the one essential resource – that comes not from us, but from God.

The Holy Spirit.

And so, today in our service, let us truly give thanks for this precious gift, and open our hearts to it, so that we may be filled afresh, and equipped in God's service.

Come Holy Spirit, and kindle in us, the fire of your love.

Amen.