

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Pentecost

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All Saints' Marseille

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A neighbour of mine is a professional photographer. He captures the play of light on land and sea with a skill that leaves me in awe. One of my favourite photographs of his is a picture of the local sailing school setting out from the harbour - beneath the tallest cliff in Europe, a string of little red and white sails, the small boats to which they belong (known as '*optimistes*') tied together in a neat row behind the larger boat of the instructor. It's called *Les Optimistes au Grand Large* ('the optimists on the open sea'), and it's a joyous sight to behold, as are the real boats out on the water when summer comes. It lifts the spirits every time I see the photo in the window on my way past his shop.

Winds are a feature of life in Provence. If you climb a hill, you may find at the top a traditional compass rose showing the names of the thirty-two winds that blow here, marked by reference to the points of the compass. There's the Levante from the east, the Ponente from the west, the Sirocco from the south and the ever-frequent Mistral from the north – which is also known as *lou mango fango* ('eater of mud') because of its drying effect on the earth.

The disciples' experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is described in terms of a 'rushing, mighty wind'. That's the image which Luke, the evangelist who also wrote the book of Acts, chooses to try and explain its effect on them. It's a brilliant image to capture something that is powerful, life-giving and invisible to human sight. The wind is always there, and we experience it at different moments as a gentle breeze or something that can knock you off your feet with its force.

Bishop John V. Taylor, who wrote some of the most moving words about the Holy Spirit published in the last fifty years, said this in one of his last sermons:

'The invisible air that brushes your cheek is the same air that extends beyond the farthest clouds ... It enfolds the whole earth and, without that embrace, this would be a lifeless planet. Such is the transcendence of the Creator. Yet, entering you on every breath you take, it refreshes and renews your being and, exhaled, it takes with it your stale impurities so that breathing itself is a continuous absolution. ... Such is the immanence, the within-ness, of God. To say 'Where can I find God?' is like asking 'Where is this atmosphere they keep talking about?'. You are in it and it is in you. So also God is Spirit, breath, in whom we live and move and have our being. ...

God's entering into all things is the culmination of a ... self-giving whereby he becomes one with the object of his love. In all our moments of special aliveness God is delighting within us, in all our affliction he is afflicted, and [picking up on the passage in Romans which we heard in our Epistle] when we are most truly in prayer we become aware that we are being prayed through by a voice and a will that is greater than our own.'

The receiving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost marks the conclusion of the season of Easter, the end of the long journey we began on Ash Wednesday when we turned to reflect on the approach of Jesus's suffering and death. The first disciples had the extraordinary experience of the new life of the risen Jesus after the Resurrection. Then he withdrew from them at the Ascension and became no longer visible, but the experience of God they received instead was utterly life-changing. 2000 years on, its energy and power are undiminished. God inspiring humanity, again and again, in unchanging power. Like the wind in the sails of a ship. Making humans capable of things they never thought they could do. Galvanizing the little group who had gone back to fishing but instead went out to change the world. Inspiring countless people down the ages to do extraordinary things. And ordinary ones, but with openness to the dimension of the transcendent, the vision of the glory of God, and the inspiration of the message of Christ's love for the world. As Taylor puts it: 'The powerful Spirit of life, the onward drive of God's good purpose that we might have life and have it to the full. We are asked only to spread our sails and trust ourselves wholly to God's will and direction. We cannot plot the course in advance nor know our destination, for the wind blows where it will and we have no idea whence it comes or whither it is going. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit', as Jesus explains to Nicodemus.

It has been said that, to the question 'How does God act nowadays?', the answer is 'mainly in two ways'. The first is through followers being empowered to walk in the steps of Jesus (which is the Church). The second is by making Christ present in surprising and wonderful places (which is the Kingdom). And the Holy Spirit is the agent that does both of those things.

Importantly, therefore, this isn't just about Christians. People often express amazement when individuals perform extraordinary acts of kindness – carers in a pandemic, rescuers at the scene of a disaster, in both cases acting at risk of their own safety to help others. Observers notice how behaviour that is good and precious can surround events that are harmful and destabilising. This is about the world - people of other faiths and none, the action of God far beyond the influence of the church – and it's a wonderful thing, which we celebrate. That's why so many different languages are spoken in the Acts story. The map of those languages corresponds to the four corners of the earth - arranged north, south, east and west, like the winds on a compass rose in Provence. The writer is emphasising that the life-giving gifts of God are for the whole world.

Our engagement with both aspects of God's work matters, and it is important to keep them in balance. Our awareness of the action of God in the world reminds us not to be too narrow in our thinking, to be open to the breadth of the Spirit's action. Our awareness of the action of God in our communities reminds us that the church is a gift from God, which we haven't fully unwrapped yet. Pentecost is its birthday and that is why we are celebrating.

And, even in our times of weakness, our reading from Romans reminds us that this doesn't inhibit the Spirit acting. That's a source of hope, even in the toughest of times. It's one of the things you notice about people who move in the company of the Spirit. It doesn't mean they don't know sorrow, difficulty or pressure. But there's a deeper trust they have learned, often in the hardest of ways that you would never know unless

you knew. A deeper trust which makes them good company to keep. Christ had that trust in the Father to the end: 'Yet not my will, but yours be done.'

So, on this day of Pentecost, let us raise our sails to the wind, be of good courage and launch out into the deep, trusting in the Spirit of God. Who knows - we might even become like those little boats in the photo: *Les Optimistes au Grand Large*.

Amen.