

The Day of Pentecost

St Briavels, Hewelsfield, and The Chase, 2022

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:8-17

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

The order of service for the coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 70 years and three days ago, is fascinating. It is readily available online, and I recommend reading it some time at your leisure. It has a good deal to say about authority, and its proper exercise in relation to the justice, mercy and kindness of God.

It was, of course, a service of great ceremony and ritual. A world away from our quiet and intimate gathering here today. There were great processions stretching the entire length of the Abbey nave, extraordinary choral music from great composers such as Purcell, Walton, Holst, Elgar, Parry and Handel. Regalia of all sorts and descriptions was presented, put on and taken off. The great and the good were assembled, and the entire Abbey was closed for five months in preparation for the service. A quite extraordinary endeavour, leading to the quite extraordinary reign of her Majesty the Queen, who is of course the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, allegiance to whom [David, Mandy] and I, as well as all the churchwardens of our parishes have sworn, and whose Diamond Jubilee celebrations we continue to celebrate today.

A huge amount of the Coronation service was, of course, very public, with the service televised for the first time, which the Netflix serial *The Crown* had huge fun with depicting all

manner of turmoil and disagreement about. But at the very heart of the service there was an extraordinarily intimate moment. Indeed so intimate that this was the one point during the service where a canopy covered the Queen, held by four Knights of the Garter, so that the television cameras couldn't see what was going on. And what was happening at that incredibly private moment was not the crowning, it wasn't the swearing of any oaths. It was the anointing. At the very heart of the service, with the young Queen shielded from the view of the public, holy oil was administered. The oil of chrism. The oil that has been, through the whole of Christian history, the outward and visible symbol of the Holy Spirit. And the Archbishop said this:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who by his Father was anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows, by this holy anointing pour down upon your Head and Heart the blessing of the Holy Ghost.”

Today, in the traditional calendar of the Church of England, is Whitsunday. Recent reform renames it Pentecost, recovering the Old Testament connections of the feast, but the traditional name is better, because it is a contraction of White Sunday. And it is called ‘White Sunday’ not because of the colour that the clergy wear - as you can see that is red - but because of the traditional colour worn by candidates for confirmation on this day. Today, traditionally, is a day for confirmation, and indeed candidates are being confirmed in our cathedral today. They would wear white, just as was worn at their baptism, because of the symbolism of the taking on of a new life, a new identity.

And at baptism and confirmation, just as at Coronation, the heart of the service is the calling down of the Holy Spirit. And traditionally at all of those occasions, just as at ordination as

well, actually, holy oil is used to symbolise the promise and gift of the Holy Spirit.

Just compare the words that we use: as oil is administered at baptism we say, “May God pour upon you the riches of his grace that you may daily be renewed by his anointing spirit.”

At Confirmation: “God has called you by name and made you his own.”

At Ordination: “May God, who anointed the Christ with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, anoint and empower you to reconcile and bless his people.”

And then, as I just said, at Coronation, “by his holy anointing pour down the blessing of the Holy Ghost and prosper the work of your hands.”

The oil is a symbol of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, that anointing we hear about at Jesus’s own baptism, that, in our first reading today, was manifested with the sound of wind, and the symbol of fire (that symbol of fire, by the way, the reason that we wear red today). The Holy Spirit by whose inspiration the first apostles began to move out from Jerusalem, and Palestine, and carried this story of hope and grace and peace further and further, and to the ends of the world, so that a story that begins in a backwater town of an occupied nation in the Mediterranean basin ends up being told in Hewelsfield, and St Briavels, and Tidenham Chase.

What can we say of this Holy Spirit, this Spirit which is invoked at the very beginning of the Christian life, at our baptism? And that we continue to invoke at every stage of our journey: at our confirmation. Some of us, at our ordination. Even fewer of us,

but still some, at our Coronation. I often say at the baptism of a baby, as I anoint their little head with oil, that parents should watch out for this oil, because it might come back over and over again, this little boy or girl might one day grow up to be king or queen and be anointed again: what can we say of this Holy Spirit?

Well there’s lots. And all sorts of different Pentecost sermons will be preached today. But let’s just focus on that one little phrase from the gospel reading: Jesus says you know the Holy Spirit, “because he *abides* with you”. What a wonderful word is ‘abiding’. It means the Holy Spirit lives with us, but the English word abide is a much more evocative one. The Greek literally translates as something like ‘with you he remains, and in you he will be.’

The Holy Spirit is the hallmark of the Christian, and the breath of the Church. A piece of liturgy that failed to make the cut, but really should have done, was going to say, “do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the breath and the kiss of God within you?” Christians are made by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that Holy Spirit remains with us throughout the rest of our ministry. We note that presence particularly at certain occasions, like confirmation, ordination, or Coronation, but that doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit is only present then. And on a day when we give particular thanks for 70 years of ministry to us from a Christian who has demonstrated the most extraordinary steadfastness of faith, we might remember that to hold fast in our faith is to remember that we are daily enlivened, sustained, given our voice, our faith, our breath, by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And that our Christian identity is not mainly manifested in extraordinary moments. The Pentecostal movement has given us many blessings, but amongst its dangers is that idea that to

really possess the Holy Spirit is to do extraordinary things, very public and powerful things. Some do. But there's a reason that the canopy came down over the Queen at her anointing. And there's a reason that most anointings of the Holy Spirit happen in churches like this, not on the big stage, not televised, not attended by squadrons of Bishops, but around little fonts like this one. The call of the Christian is to allow the Holy Spirit to *abide*. To be faithful. To be indwelt. To grow into, to live into, the identity of the Christian, which is first and foremost about being a person in whom God's spirit dwells, and to be faithful. And on this Whitsunday, this Day of Pentecost, what an example we have of Christian service. And we might be inspired by that example, and remember that the most important, the revolutionary, the life changing moment of the Holy Spirit came not at her coronation, but 26 years earlier, at her baptism. And although it is entirely possible that the Holy Spirit may take us to extraordinary places, and extraordinary roles, it is very much more likely that Her Majesty's most enduring characteristic is the same one which to we are called by that Holy Spirit: to be faithful.

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