

The Second Sunday after Trinity
St Briavels and Hewelsfield, 2023

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Three weeks ago, at Pentecost, we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples in the upper room, 50 days after Jesus had risen from the dead, and 10 days after his ascension into heaven. And whoever was preaching then will have said something about the fact that the coming of the Holy Spirit is really the birthday of the church. The Holy Spirit is the presence and power, the breath and the kiss of God within us, in whose power, and touched by whose love, the church does everything. Without the Holy Spirit, the Church can really do nothing. Or nothing good anyway.

And the preacher might also said something about the fact that Pentecost is the last day of the first half of the Christian year. Ever since Advent we have been telling the story of the foretelling, birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. And all of that culminates with this extraordinary gifting of the Holy Spirit on the first apostles. And then the rest of the year, all the way through this long sequence of Sundays after Trinity, 21 of them this year, we remind ourselves, or we learn for the first time, or we go deeper into exploring how, we live in the Spirit. How is it that Holy Spirit is poured out on you and me, is poured out on the parish and the village of *St Briavels/Hewelsfield*. How can we go, as the apostles did, and be God's people. Be God's family?

Well, I'd like to start briefly with the letter to the Romans, and then work my way towards the gospel. Poor old St Paul gets a pretty bad press, and yes, a lot of his writing is complicated and dense. But actually here he's really clear. And thinking about Pentecost a few weeks ago, notice what St Paul says about our justification by faith. That's St Paul saying that our relationship with God is dependent only, solely, on our faith in him, and not on anything we do. That was a really important bit of teaching at Reformation: we don't buy our way into God's good graces; we don't earn our salvation by going to church, or saying a lot of prayers, or giving so much money to charity. No, it is about relationship. And it is about hope. Let me just read verse five from our first reading again to you: 'hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit'.

Remember that elsewhere St Paul talks about the three legged stool of our believing: faith, hope and love. Well he's talking here about the 'hope' part of that, the capacity that we have to believe even when it seems improbable or unlikely or even nearly impossible that God might love us, and might know us, and might want to live at the very heart of our life. Paul says that we *can* believe that, we can be *hopeful*, because of the Holy Spirit. Because, fundamentally, God has already come to us.

Having a relationship with God is not like trying to coax your cat out from under the bed so that you can take to the vets. You can see I'm preaching from personal experience here. God is not like Esther the cat, who has to be coaxed and persuaded and bribed to come close to us. God is already here. Because the promise of Pentecost is the promise that God in his Holy Spirit has taken up his lodging, his abiding – I think I might have preached about abiding last time - in our hearts. In our souls. God is already here.

And that's the key to the rest of our life as Christian people. It's a free gift.

Hence Jesus's words to the disciples as he sends them out on their preaching expedition. We have this wonderful passage of the sending out of the 12 apostles. We get the names of the 12 apostles - a slightly different set of names to elsewhere in Scripture, probably because people went by several different names. Thaddeus, in our reading today for example, is almost certainly the same person as Jude. Bartholomew in our reading is the same person as Nathaniel in John's gospel.

And, if you like, this passage gives us a bit of a brief, or a bit of a job description, for the Christian church even today. Because the task hasn't changed because this was 2000 years ago in Palestine, and now we are in 2023 in the Forest of Dean. What does Jesus do? He teaches, preaches, and cures. And then he summons the apostles and gives them the same task. They are to go out and proclaim the Kingdom. To proclaim that same message that we pray for every time we say the Lord's Prayer, 'thy kingdom come'. And if you notice, here and elsewhere in Scripture, whenever the Kingdom is proclaimed, the world begins to be put back together. In other words healing begins to happen. Things that are broken and disordered and damaged begin to become whole, and healthy, and healed again.

That's why there are so many references in Scripture to healing and casting out of demons, alongside the apostles' ministry of preaching and teaching.

And that is still the work of the church today. Proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. Teach the family of God so that

we are well informed and articulate. And pray for the wholeness and healing of the world.

Just occasionally that might look like actual physical healing. That does happen sometimes. Just very occasionally it might look like something we call exorcism - and if that really interests you I wrote a very long, very expensive, and very boring book about that about six years ago - but most the time healing is at the level of the soul, the level of the heart, and at the level of communities too. Where the kingdom of God advances, our hearts become aligned with God's. And so we become more merciful, more gentle, more hopeful - which goes back to what St Paul is saying in our first reading. And that is what is needed in our world right now, just as it has always been what is needed. A world community that is more merciful, more gentle, and more hopeful. And that is what Christians are supposed to be, and are supposed to promote, and are supposed to witness to.

And our claim, of course, is that that mercy, gentleness and hope come not from ourselves, but from the person and nature of Jesus Christ. We receive from him this gift freely, and so we give it freely too. We receive it - think back to the beginning of this sermon - because the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in our hearts. And the Holy Spirit comes because of the extraordinary crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In a hymn that we are not singing today but they do sing down the road in Tutshill, 'here in the power of Christ I stand'. Only in the power of Christ.

And that of course is why we share Communion together. In a few moments time you will receive a physical symbol, sacrament, of that free grace, that justification by faith. Christ comes to be with us. Body, blood, soul and divinity. And we just stretch out our hands and receive. Amen.