

## PENTECOST 2023 ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR

I remember that, just about twenty years ago, I found myself in conversation with quite a large group of intelligent young adults. They were RAF officers-in-training and I had been giving a talk about something or other. Afterwards, over a post-lecture drink, conversation turned to religion. I wondered how many of them were churchgoers. As I expected, the answer was 'very few'. I went on to ask how many of them believed in God. Though the number was greater than those who went to church, God-believers were still in the minority. I risked a further question. How many of them said their prayers? I was surprised at the response. After some initial shyness, most of the people with whom I was in conversation, admitted that, at least from time to time, they prayed. Perhaps I should not have been surprised. While, for better or for worse, there is widespread disillusion with institutional religion, and while childlike images of God are jettisoned with nothing yet found to fill the gap, it seems natural for the human heart to reach out to, to cry to, something or someone 'out there'.

I think I have mentioned before in this Chapel that, during the early centuries of the history of the Christian Church, a certain adage was very much in circulation. It was said that "Birds fly, fishes swim, and human beings pray". It looks as though, when those early Christians asked questions about themselves, they reckoned that, as it is just natural for birds to fly and fish to swim, it is simply natural for human beings to pray. Prayer, and together with it worship of course, is a distinctive expression of our true humanity; of, you might say, our place in the scheme of things.

Words that I have also quoted once or twice before in this place come from the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin., the twentieth century priest, Jesuit and palaeontologist. In his 'The Divine Milieu', he writes: "The more man becomes man, the more he will become prey to a need, a need that is always more explicit, more subtle and more magnificent, the need to adore". For de Chardin, prayer and worship become increasingly part of our lives as we grow and develop as real human beings; they are expressions of human maturity.

All this, however, leaves us with a serious question. Are prayer and worship what we might call human 'works'? Is this inner energy and this drive something that is (albeit unconsciously) 'self-generated'? Sometimes, within the Christian tradition, we have been encouraged to think so. We have been told to say our prayers and go to church as a matter of duty and discipline and, even as a means of achieving what could be called 'self-justification'. Something natural is quashed.

The seventeenth century poet George Herbert had a different view of it. In his sonnet 'Prayer', he describes prayer as "God's breath in man returning to his birth".

Here of course, he alludes to the second chapter of the book Genesis in which, having moulded Adam from the dust of the ground, "God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life".

It is generally understood that the word for 'breath' can also be translated as the word for 'spirit'. It is the divine spirit that is breathed into the dust-formed Adam so that he becomes a living being; truly alive.

George Herbert understands that this same spirit (God's breath) inspires every human being and that true prayer and true worship are not self-generated works of self-justification but openness to, and acceptance of, the gift of the spirit (God's being with us) on the spirit's return pilgrimage to the Creator God.

What is prayer? Prayer is "God's breath in man returning to his birth". Prayer is the working of the divine spirit within us drawing us ever closer to the One who made us. It is forever God's work to which our hearts (always mysteriously by God's grace) must simply be open.

But, as I have said, all too often it has not been seen to be God's activity in us so much as the product of our own endeavour; our own work. The flow of God's spirit is stemmed by our stultifying self-justification.

As I understand it, Jesus lived among a people who were suffering from such stultifying self-justification. The religious legalism of the time with all those regulations, was an impediment to the free operation of God's spirit – the spirit that, like the wind said Jesus, "blows where it chooses". Moreover, since it is God's breath in us that makes us fully human, any stifling of that breath threatens our genuine humanity.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, a day on which, among many other things, we remember (as we heard in our second lesson) Jesus, after his resurrection, standing among his disciples, breathing on them, and commanding them to receive, be open to, the Holy Spirit.

Here is, you might say, a new creation, the disciples standing in the place of Adam, receiving the 'inspiration', the 'breathing into them', that will be the guarantee of their full humanity; all that they were ever meant to be.

The breath, the spirit of course, as Jesus made plain in all his teaching and his healing, is the spirit of God's love. That spirit, "God's breath in man returning to his

birth", is of course the spirit of prayer; prayer (not as some esoteric activity) but as the natural centre of a way of life; a way of living that keeps the heart open to the free movement of God's loving spirit as the Spirit draws us ever closer to the Father, and to the Father's will.

Sadly, what I have called 'stultifying self-justification' is rife in today's society and, it must be said, within the Church. We seem to be crippledly over-regulated and suffering from a surfeit of legislation that we delude ourselves will make for a better world. Afraid of being found wanting, many of us cower and keep our heads below the parapet while desperately guarding our own backs.

If our humanity is to be preserved and enhanced, we desperately need a release of the spirit of love into the system; love with all its ingredients of patience, understanding, kindness and forgiveness.

Perhaps, on Pentecost Sunday, as we reflect on the 'inspiring' of the first disciples with Christ's free and loving spirit, we might pray for all of us a change of heart and a 'return' to our true selves.