

MAKING JESUS REAL

Some years ago, I went to an exhibition of late works by the artist Matisse. At the end of his life, he had a major operation and was more or less confined to bed. But his physical frailty did not affect his creativity and he began to produce extraordinary collages made up of coloured paper cut-outs, full of light and energy and joy that have inspired and delighted people ever since. Matisse was a genius, and I came away from the exhibition realizing that my knowledge and appreciation of his life and work was pretty superficial, and wanting to know more. I was reminded that there's a world of difference between knowing about and knowing for oneself. It's the same with people. I know a lot about the Queen, for example, but I've never met her, and I can't claim to know her in any personal way.

Christianity can be a bit like this. We can read the Bible. We can know about Jesus' life and his teaching. We can understand the Church and her funny ways. But knowing a lot about something does not guarantee that you are personally engaged. You can go through the motions, but never come to the point where you have moved from knowing about to knowing for yourself. Well, Whitsunday is all about this transformation process. Today we are celebrating the Spirit of God who makes Jesus alive and personal in you, in me, in the Church, in the world.

We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song. Easter is at the heart of the Christian life. Look at the first disciples that first Easter Sunday. They were having to rethink their way of knowing Jesus from the beginning, to reassess the person they thought they knew in the light of the cross and resurrection. But it didn't end there. It wasn't just the way that they had known Jesus that had to change, but their understanding of God and his purpose for the world, and most importantly of all, their own relationship with him.

You can see this re-thinking process going on in the New Testament. Look at St Paul. His letters are all about what the Cross and Resurrection implies for Christians living in his own time. "If Jesus has died and is risen", he is saying, "this is what it means, this is how we must live". He comes up with the astonishing insight that the Jesus who died and rose from the dead 25 years or so before is actually alive in the present

within them and among them. Amazingly, he suggests that they themselves have actually been crucified with Christ and that they are, in fact, risen with him. Just consider for a moment about how extraordinary that thought must have seemed to them. It must have blown their minds. “Wherever we go”, cries Paul, “we carry with us in our bodies the death of the Lord Jesus, so that in this body also the life that Jesus lives might be revealed”. The tenses are important. The life that Jesus lives. They are not following a dead Lord. He is alive and is so completely one with them that as they live their lives now he is living within them and they within him.

I find it incredible that Paul has arrived at this understanding of the Cross and Resurrection so soon after the actual events of Good Friday and Easter. He has grasped the fact that the Cross and Resurrection are not simply events that have happened in the past, but are being reproduced in the lives of those he is writing to. But what matters particularly for us this Whitsunday is that he also makes it clear that it is the Holy Spirit who forges this identity between the risen Christ and the believer and helps this relationship to flourish within them and among them. It is the Spirit who makes Good Friday and Easter real in their lives. “If the Spirit of him who raised Christ Jesus from the dead dwells in you” he writes to the Christians in Rome, “then the God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give new life to your mortal bodies through his indwelling Spirit”. It’s like that magic moment when the penny drops and you see something that you hadn’t been able to grasp up to that point. It’s the Holy Spirit that makes the penny drop and makes Jesus alive in our hearts.

Today we are celebrating the Holy Spirit who is making Easter real, making Jesus first-hand. When in a moment we stand to say the Creed, don’t imagine that we are just affirming a dry and dusty statement of Christian belief. What we are actually doing is affirming the experience of God at work in the lives of Christian people down the ages. Think of it this way: “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and was made man”, we say. What that means is: Christmas is not just a past event. God comes to birth today in me and in you. “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate”. What that means is that we have been crucified with Christ”. “On the third day he rose again” - Jesus is risen within each one of us. Henceforth we live, but Christ lives in us. “He ascended into heaven” – we are rooted and grounded in heaven, our true destiny, our real home.

Today, on Whitsunday, we celebrate the gift of the Spirit who makes Jesus - who was born at Bethlehem, who died at Calvary, and rose on the third day - alive within us as our contemporary, our friend. It's the Spirit who makes the dry bones of doctrine spring to vibrant life in the struggles and opportunities of our daily experience.

Here are a few ways in which we can recognize that the Holy Spirit is indeed making Jesus alive within us:

First of all, look at the way he changes people. St Paul said that when the Holy Spirit works within us we will begin to be more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient, more kind, more self-controlled. These are not qualities that can be artificially produced or imposed from outside. They are nurtured quietly within our personalities over time – the seed grows secretly. The Holy Spirit works in people by perfecting their own unique qualities of personality that they have already been given. So the Spirit encourages us to become our true selves. We don't become cardboard cut-outs when God works within us, but more completely the people we were always intended to be, revealing the qualities that St Paul describes. One of the great privileges of being a parish priest is to see this happening over and over and over again in all sorts of different people. For me, one of the most powerful reasons for being a Christian is seeing the way God takes us, loves us and changes us. That's what the Spirit is already doing in you and in me, and what he will continue to do if we let him.

Another way in which you can confirm the work of the Spirit within you is that your desire for God will be growing. As we grow in Christian faith, so our longing for God develops. Which leads us to want to pray. "God doth not ask a perfect work", said St Theresa, "but only infinite desire". As we pray, so our desire for God grows, and as our desire grows, so we want to pray. It's a virtuous circle. The Holy Spirit makes God attractive, real, relevant for us. So he makes our worship and prayer more genuine, more alive. He inspires our response to God, and fills us with love and joy and peace. Let's give thanks for all that we have already received, and pray for the Spirit to inspire our prayer and our worship today. A sign that we are growing in Christ is that our praying and our worshipping will be more real, more Spirit-filled.

And finally, the Holy Spirit makes community. He turns us from a collection of individuals into a fellowship. He helps us accept one another, value one another, affirm one another's gifts, and work together for the common good. The Holy Spirit forms the Church, and inspires our Christian creativity. The Holy Spirit turns us outwards in service to work with God to carry forward his kingdom on earth as in heaven. Let's thank God for all that he has given to this community down the years, and pray for the Spirit to work powerfully among us here now and in the months ahead.

God is always working through his Spirit to renew the face of the earth. The world is his arena. We are called together as members of the Church to be a Spirit-filled sign of his purpose, pointing to his presence everywhere, celebrating his life and love. And each of us is filled with special gifts of the Spirit to play our part in this wonderful purpose.

Let me end with this prayer, which comes at the end of every Service of Morning Prayer:

Eternal God and Father,
you create us by your power
and redeem us by your love.
Guide and strengthen us by your Spirit,
that we may give ourselves in love and service
to one another and to you.

May that prayer be realised in my life and yours. Amen.