

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021**  
**Pentecost or Whit Sunday**

**Collect**

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father,  
ignite in us your holy fire;  
strengthen your children with the gift of faith,  
revive your Church with the breath of love,  
and renew the face of the earth,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Romans 8:22-27**

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

**John 15:26-27; 16:4-15**

‘When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

‘I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, “Where are you going?” But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

## Sermon

On *Call the Midwife* a couple of weeks ago, there was a very powerful scene that I want to share with you. For those of you who are unfamiliar, *Call the Midwife* is based around a fictional Anglican religious house, Nonnatus House, situated in Poplar in the East End of London. The sisters of Nonnatus House are trained midwives and are supported by other nurses and midwives, most of whom board at Nonnatus. The first series was set in the mid 1950s, and programme has now reached 1966. Sister Monica Joan is one of the original cast. Since the programme began, she has been retired, and storylines have included her increasing frailty and the possible onset of dementia. As the current series began, she experienced a complete loss of faith, and we have shared with the anguish this has created for both her and the other sisters.

Which brings me to the scene I would like to share. The episode was set around the World Cup Final in 1966, and on finals day, an expectant mother went into labour, and pitched up at Nonnatus House, hoping to find assistance. While most of the midwives were watching the match in the community centre, a student midwife came to her aid, supported by Sister Monica Joan. And then, after a successful delivery, we find Sister Monica Joan staring at the placenta.

Another sister enters, and this is the exchange that follows. Sister Monica Joan says: "I never cease to marvel at its beauty when exposed. This, the least visible of all the body's organs, laid before us for our scrutiny. This was one of a thousand things that made midwifery a privilege." The other sister comments that she is often so preoccupied with checking that the placenta is complete, that she forgets to notice its beauty.

Sister Monica Joan continues: "It grows with us; it fires us; it sustains the very beating of our blood. When I see this with all its lines, with all its tracteries, I see the very miracle of God himself. I see his handiwork. And I see his love. I see where I began, what fed me, and what feeds me now. It is complete. And so, within his love, am I."

Having been in the desolation of doubt and despair, Sister Monica Joan experiences a return to faith: "I witnessed a new life beginning and my darkness died."

The scene was at once powerful and tender. What struck me the most was the way in which Sister Monica Joan was able to articulate all that lay at the heart of her faith. The love of a creator God, sustaining us throughout our lives. A love that she had seen over and over as she had been present at countless births. A love, no doubt, that she had held on to as she witnessed both tragedy and joy; delight and despair in the lives of various families in the East End of London.

It made me wonder how often each one of us returns to those foundations which hold us in our faith. And it struck me that today, as we consider the work of the Holy Spirit in each one of our lives, it might be worth taking time to reflect on what lies at the heart of our faith.

I wonder what that is for you. Perhaps it is similar to the love of which Sister Monica Joan speaks, and perhaps you can identify moments in your own life when you have connected especially powerfully and meaningfully with that love. Often such moments do not take place when and where we would expect. It might be that you remember significant moments at work, or with friends; in the natural world; perhaps even when you were entirely alone, except for that realisation of God's loving presence.

As I read this morning's readings, I found myself reminded of a particularly powerful moment I experienced when I was teaching. For my first three years as a teacher I had the same Tutor Group, from the year they joined the school at the age of 11 until they were 14. Over those years I got to know them quite well. Those early teenage years are especially formational, and in the transition into secondary school, I watched many of them transition from the anxiety of starting at a new school where they were the youngest, to a greater confidence – for better or worse.

Where I taught, the Citizenship curriculum was delivered by tutors, and this was another way of getting to know my tutor group better, since we discussed a range of issues, from politics to relationships and morality. During one particular discussion we were focusing on hopes and dreams. Part of the point was to explore what might be of practical help in enabling these young people to achieve their goals. Another was to help them to focus just a little more deeply on what really mattered to them.

Unsurprisingly with teenagers, the conversation began with the range of aspirations you might expect, from the latest consumer goods, to earning enormous salaries, and being popular. And yet, as we continued and dug a little deeper, the young people had absolutely no doubt about what really mattered. Their friendships; their family. They recognised the value of good health, while also understanding that it cannot be guaranteed.

The reason that this moment was particularly powerful is because it is one that I have seen repeated time and again. For that particular group of young people, read almost any young person. In the depths of their souls, they have an understanding of what really matters. Because they were created in God's image, by a loving God.

Please don't mistake me. I am not trying to suggest that we all live lives which place what really matters front and centre. Far from it. As with any teacher, I know that some of those young people will have gone on to make bad decisions. Others will have decided to focus on large salaries and consumer goods, rather than remembering what they knew to be more important. Yet one of the things that holds me firm is the knowledge that deep down we really do know what matters. Because God made us. And God loves us.

While this morning's gospel reading is in many ways John at his most impenetrable, I keep finding myself drawn to what I think might be the sense of what Jesus is saying. Somehow Jesus recognises that he is leaving an imperfect world, and that it will continue to be imperfect. Yet, for all its imperfections, there is still something stronger, and that is truth. And the truth is that somewhere deep down we all know that the right answer is love. Always. We may fail to live it – goodness knows, we all do more often than we would like. But our failures simply cannot extinguish the truth. And, just as the reading from Romans reminds us, even when we feel at our weakest, the Holy Spirit can still act within us, praying for us when we have forgotten how.

I wonder what it is that grounds you in your faith. Which moments have reminded you of what matters most. And, on this feast of Pentecost, I wonder whether we might all find new ways to release the gifts of the Spirit within us.

Amen