

## **'The Spirit: Artist, Composer, Poet & Explorer' – A Homily for Pentecost**

*Genesis 11.1–9*

*Acts of the Apostles 2.1–21*

*John 14.8–17*

One of the things that intrigued me about All Saints as I was thinking and praying through whether to come here as Vicar was that it had a 'Spirit Chapel.' I have experienced a 'Lady Chapel' before, indeed, most churches of any real size have them, a smaller side chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but a Spirit Chapel? What is that all that about?

If you find yourself in our Spirit Chapel, and I hope you do, take a moment to look up. At the apex of the space you will see a symbol of the Spirit, the dove that Moses released from the ark as the waters of chaos subsided; the same dove that alights on Jesus at his baptism as the heavens are torn open and an apocalyptic vision is unveiled; the same dove that now alights on the Church, descending, as Eugene Rogers tells us, 'as a foretaste of heaven, to rest by anticipation on the bodies that will be deified.' In the Spirit Chapel, this same dove casts beams of light and inspiration down into the chapel, alighting, as it were, on five figures representing humanity, colourfully carved on the reredos behind the altar.

And who are these figures? Here we encounter Roger Bacon, a thirteenth century scientist, Fr Angelico, a fifteenth century painter, William Byrd, a sixteenth century composer and musician, Dante, a thirteenth century writer and poet, and at the centre, the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, the one upon whom the Spirit descended, the one who gave birth to the eternal Word.

There is a lot going on here, as our amazing building once more gives us a

radical vision of what a real Christian Humanism might look like. Our Spirit Chapel challenges us with a vision of the Holy Spirit as the creative impulse in all human creativity and discovery, the generative God that lies at the heart of 'faith seeking understanding,' the Spirit that enlightens our spirits and lifts our imaginations, inspiring us to sing and to paint, to write and to enquire, to doubt and to explore, to love and to be loved.

In a modern age which loves to pit the narrow fundamentalism of religion against an aggressively atheistic understanding of science, Roger Bacon, a medieval friar and philosopher, shows us how scientific enquiry and religious faith can belong together, that exploring how our world works through mathematical formulae, astronomy and philosophy can only augment our capacity for wonder and mystery. Science without faith might reduce the world to a mere thing to dissect and control, but faith without science becomes a narrow fundamentalism unable to ask questions of truth. But together, faith and science seek to understand and revere the delicate mysteries that lie at the heart of our world. And the same Spirit is at work in both.

If Bacon shows us how the Spirit inspires scientific and philosophical exploration and discovery, it is Fra Angelico who shows us that the Spirit inspires the great artists and painters of the world. One of my favourites is his depiction of the annunciation in which the soft pinkish hues of the Virgin's garments are mirrored by the gently flowing drapes of the angel Gabriel, and in which the soft and delicate facial features of each perfectly compliment the other. It is the artist who asks us to look again at our world, to draw it with depth and meaning, to explore it in all its vibrance and colour.

It was Augustine who said that 'singing is for one who loves,' and in our Spirit Chapel it is William Byrd who reminds us that this same Spirit is at work in the

musicians and composers of our world. Music enables us to articulate and feel the heights and depths of our human loves, to lament in sorrow and loss, and to be joyful in triumph. Surely music really is the language of love, and not just our loves, but God's also. As the Song of Solomon says, 'love is as strong as death, its flashes a jealous flame.' This is nothing less than the flame of the Spirit, the same fire that causes us to worship, hearts lifted up in the praise of the one who calls us into being. Here we become the orchestra of God's music.

And finally it is Dante who represents the poets, those who spend time with words in order to delve a little more deeply into things to strain words to speak of a truth that is hard to hear, to take the daily rhythm of things and to make it strange to our ear. And even here in this strange place, the same Spirit speaks. Rowan Williams has this to say about poetry, 'poetry is generated by facing love at a certain depth; by facing death and suffering at a certain depth... those are the moments at the heart of the imaginative experience.' It is the Spirit of God that draws us into such a poetic imagination.

Perhaps, in the end, in all of these things, science, art, music, poetry and philosophy, the Spirit is calling each of us to live into a certain depth, to pierce through the easy surface of things and to begin to really see, to see ourselves, our world, our God, as we really are. And that this might finally move us towards a vision of heaven, a vision only faith can complete. As Dante at the end of his Divine Comedy writes:

'But my wings were not  
Sufficient. It took faith's flash to supply  
My mind with that sharp blow by which it got  
Its wish. Imagination, there on high –

Too high to breathe free, after such a climb –  
had lost its power; but now, just like a wheel  
That spins so evenly it measures time  
By space, the deepest wish that I could feel  
And all my will, were turning with the love  
That moves the sun and all the stars above.'

It is to this Spirit, 'the love that moves the sun and all the stars above' that we look  
to, to fill us with her Pentecostal fire. Amen.