

HOMILY FOR PENTECOST SUNDAY

How do you explain something which is invisible? Obviously, you say something about what it does or what it means. For instance, if you had to describe the wind to someone, you might speak about how it comes from high and low pressure systems and how it tosses branches about and hits you in the face.

Seems obvious but, we can begin to understand the struggle for the writers of our Scriptures to try and explain who the Holy Spirit is and what his purpose is. When Jesus was baptised, mention was made of the Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove, a symbol of peace after the flood of Noah. At his Baptism, the Holy Spirit revealed Jesus as one who brought a new experience of peace.

The first reading revealed the Holy Spirit as a powerful wind bringing flames upon the heads of the disciples on the day of Pentecost. Since the Holy Spirit was mentioned at the creation of the world as the breath of God, the wind with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a sign that Jesus' followers were a new creation.

The fact that fire appeared on the heads had the significance of empowering them. Fire tempers steel – makes it stronger. My grandfather was a blacksmith and I remember as a child, having the privilege of pushing the button on his electric bellows to start the flow of wind onto the fire to make it particularly hot in order to transform steel.

Wind and fire at Pentecost explain how these disciples were made to be stronger in their proclamation of the works of Jesus Christ. Of course, this is the same Holy Spirit we receive at Baptism and at Confirmation. The same Spirit who descends upon our bread and wine.

How do you explain something that is invisible?

In the Gospel today, Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit as the Advocate – one who stands in favour of others and who works for their wellbeing. This is certainly a description of the Holy Spirit who, we are told, helps us in our prayers and our Christian witness.

Jesus also mentions the Spirit as 'Truth'. The 'truth' which enables us to become more like Jesus Christ.

Jesus speaks about 'truth' a lot in John's Gospel. He calls himself the 'truth'. He has Pontius Pilate bewildered, wondering, "What is 'truth'?"

The 'truth' in Jesus is that God loves us and nothing can ever change that. The 'truth' is that God will have God's way and no-one will prevent what God intends, which is that we be with God forever. 'Truth' is the opposite of 'falsehood'.

We live in a world of 'falsehood'. When we feel worthless because we fail; when we are coaxed into believing that our true happiness is to be found in things for which we have to work ourselves into oblivion to have; when we are faced with difficulties and we believe that aggression and self-righteousness will get us places. These are also descriptions of what is invisible.

These are what the Apostle Paul would call in the second reading, 'self-indulgences' and, he is not judging. He is simply expressing sadness for those who become victims of the pressure to become someone they really don't want to become.

Paul immediately goes on to highlight a better way of life – one which brings love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are also ways in which we describe the work of the Holy Spirit – we call them 'fruits'. It is the 'truth' for which we have been created – to be fruitful for God.

Whether he looks like a dove, wind, fire or whatever, the Spirit is about 'truth'. For us to be true to ourselves, we have to be true to God. The same God who never condemns but, who, in Jesus Christ, loves us to his death.