

Pentecost (C)

(Acts 2:1-11 / John 14:15-16.23-26)

15.05.2016

The reading of this morning's gospel passage brought to mind a very beautiful musical composition by Thomas Tallis. I expect some of you will be familiar with the piece I was led to think of: *If ye love me*. In this well-known score a few short lines from John 14 are set to music. The lyrics retained are as follows: *If ye love me, keep my commandments and I will ask the Father that He may send you another Comforter, E'en the Spirit of Truth*. What interests me this morning, what I suggest we concentrate our attention on, is especially the last phrase, in which we could say we are given the title Jesus attributes to the Comforter whom He promised to ask the Father to send us: *the Spirit of Truth*. While the actual words *the Spirit of Truth* are missing from the lectionary reading we heard this morning, I believe it would be good for us to reflect on them for a moment. The challenge I hear to be addressed to myself and to all of us through these words is to dare to ask ourselves whether or not *the Spirit of Truth* is made manifest in our daily living; to ask ourselves whether or not we are living authentic lives.

So easily our life can be lived in pretence. We can fool ourselves and others that *all is well* with us – at least that things are better than they are in fact – when there are things amiss or areas of our lives that are awry. So readily we bluff others and dupe ourselves. Not infrequently we do this quite unwittingly. Rarely, do we present to others *the full truth and nothing but the truth* about ourselves. It is not that we set out to lie, it is not that we are blatantly untruthful, but, for various reasons, we can be less than honest with ourselves and with others. I remember being struck as a young teenager by the title Cardinal John Carmel Heenan gave to the first part of his autobiography. He named it: *Not the Whole Truth*. I remember musing to myself – even then – that here was someone who was being honest enough with himself and with his readers to recognise that what would be written was not the whole truth. He was admitting to himself and acknowledging before others that what he shared would be incomplete, partial.

It is the whole notion of *truthful living* that halts my attention this morning. This notion is central to Benedict's vision for those who follow the gospel way of life he proposes in his Rule for Monks. While wanting to live what Benedict calls *the beginnings of an honest way of life*, I suspect all of us find at times that we fall short of the ideal to which we aspire. We let ourselves down. As a result, we find ourselves in that dilemma which the apostle Paul expressed so poignantly when he wrote of his suffering to find himself unable to do the good he wanted and giving into interior pressures to do the very things he would have preferred to avoid doing.

Jesus' words of promise to send us an Advocate to plead our cause, a Comforter to console us, are surely an encouragement to us when we realise that we are just like Paul, we are constantly being betrayed by our weakness. Christ's promised gift of the Spirit gives us the assurance that the integrity of life we long for can be attained by the help of God's grace. For this to happen, we must strive to be rigorously honest with God and with ourselves and also with others. That means daring to recognise, and own up to, the attitudes we display in our lives (our values, our lifestyle, our ways of relating to ourselves and others) for what they truly are. It means admitting that so easily we give into the temptation to cut corners; it means owning up to the fact that so readily we introduce and justify unhealthy compromises in the way we live our lives.

One pastor once expressed his experience in this way: *In my experience of life, honesty is a precious quality seldom found, and it is as rare in Church as it is in society*. What he said there came back to me as I listened to an elderly person I met with recently. She said to me in the course of our conversation in which she lauded a former employee of her late husband: *He is such an honest man. It is very hard to find honest people anywhere nowadays*. I suspect some of us would find ourselves agreeing with that statement, but I wonder if we are lucid enough in our own regard to recognise how this statement could be applicable to ourselves in some respects, in particular areas of our lives.

We are usually loathe to own up to dishonesty at a personal level. Again, I stress, this is not because we set out to lie, but because we are so often deluded when it comes to ourselves, blind when it comes to self-scrutiny. Some of us can be totally lacking in self-awareness. Teresa of Avila claimed that in her experience this is where most of the problems she encountered in people's spiritual life were rooted: in their lack of self-awareness. St Gregory Nazianzen addresses a strong challenge to us when he says that we should strive *to be rather than just seem to be*. If we really want to live – to truly live – then we must not settle for pretence and sham, counting that to be enough. Pretence and sham might get us by, they might help us survive, but they won't make us truly live.

Without even realising it, so very subtly, we can buy into that attitude which says *life is a stage*. We can behave like play-actors. We can satisfy ourselves to enact charades. How much we ourselves miss out on, when this is the case. We miss out on true life and well-being, as well as depriving others of what we have to share with them. As long as we content ourselves to play a personage we cannot relate to others in any meaningful way. Moreover, we lose our true self, or perhaps, sadder still, we never really find our true self.

There are some people who live their lives in a lost way. I have heard people weep as they have said something along these lines: *I have not really found myself yet. I wish the real me could stand up*. One man has rightly declared: *Self-deception is a cunning, baffling and powerful enemy of integrity*. I cannot but agree what that statement. I would contend that as long as we are caught up in self-deception, we hinder ourselves from ever coming to receive the precious gift of the person we truly are as a child of God, called to live in freedom of mind and heart, at peace in our own skin, assured of the Lord's blessing.

This is where Christ's prayer – His plea that the Father send us *the Spirit of Truth* – is of such importance. *The Spirit of Truth* is our guarantee of freedom. We have Christ's own word for this: *The truth will make you free*.

What Jesus says elsewhere in John's gospel (in chapter 16, verse 13) also comes to mind: *When the Holy Spirit, who is truth, comes, He shall guide you into all truth*. A little earlier in the same context (in John 16, verse 8), Jesus told His disciples that the Comforter He would send would begin by *convincing the world of its sin* (I think we can hear those words of Jesus as amounting to Him saying: *the Holy Spirit will convince the world of its self-deception*). I also believe it fair to say that the Spirit's mission is not only convince *the world* of its self-deception, but, the Church as well! The Church too can be self-deluding. Moreover, the same Spirit of Truth is given to deliver each one of us of the ill of personal self-delusion.

According to Jesus' teaching the Spirit of Truth has for mission to bring us to recognise, what one translation calls, *the availability of God's goodness*. Fundamentally, it is this which gives us the encouragement we need to set our *false self* aside. Once we recognise God's goodness, we can dare to cease taking refuge in fallacy and self-delusion. Recognising God's loving acceptance of us, as we are – and not only as we dream we ought to be – we are freed from our imagined need to live in pretence.

The grace of self-acceptance brings with it such liberating peace. We find ourselves able to be honest to God, ourselves and others. We start living (really *living* – not just surviving!); we find ourselves able to make choices and take decisions that are expressive of the truth of who we really are in Christ-Jesus, rather than striving to please our *false self* which actually tyrannises us. As a result of this, we discover that things we never thought imaginable in our lives become possible. We find that we are empowered (not by our own strength, but by the grace of God at work within us) to exercise greater self-mastery; we feel less enslaved to emotional instability and dishonesty; our relationships become better adjusted; we stop play-acting, hypocrisy no longer holds sway. We enter into that way of being which the gospel advocates and which St Benedict presents as his vision for us: the way of *truthful living*! Like the disciples who received the Spirit in the Pentecost event, we are empowered by the gift of the Spirit of Truth to come out of hiding. We no longer have to lock ourselves behind closed doors. Once we are convinced of what Jesus calls *the availability of God's*

*goodness*, we no longer feel threatened, afraid to appear in the open for who and what we are. We become more self-accepting and start to treat ourselves more gently. We no longer have to be accorded marks of prestige incessantly. We are liberated from that insatiable desire to win other people's approval. Once we are truly comfortable in our identity as a child of God and find our security in Him, we are liberated from many of the pressures we put ourselves under. Once we stop being preoccupied (and even dominated) by the need to win acclaim and fame, be that on the social scene or even in Christian circles, we can simply relax. We find that we are able to accept our limitations; we manage to cope with the inevitable criticisms we encounter in life. Once we are true to ourselves we are given to taste what we long for most ardently: simply to be able to live our lives, breathing fully, moving freely according to the unforced rhythm of God's grace. Comfortable in our own skin we find that we are inhabited by a deep inner peace, we are blessed to have a true sense of interior well-being. The stability we say we long for is given to us once we are firmly anchored in Christ, established in Him, built upon and rooted in His love.

The power Jesus had promised His disciples would feel when the Holy Spirit would be given to them is none other than the power of love. The Holy Spirit is *God's love poured into our hearts*. This gift is given to us today. The Spirit of truth and love is accorded to us, just as readily and just as abundantly as it was first bestowed upon the disciples gathered in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost.

In our first reading we heard what happened on the day of Pentecost: *The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit*. God's presence embraced and encompassed them. Not only did the tongues of fire descend upon the disciples' heads, the Spirit came to settle in the disciples' hearts. They were inflamed by the Spirit. Yes, the disciples were *in-flamed*: a gentle fire, with a warm glow, was lit in their hearts. This same fire still burns in the hearts of believers today. Through the Church – in and through each one of us – as long as the Spirit's flame is kept fanned, it remains vibrant. The warmth of God's love is released to accomplish its healing work in our broken world.

The Lord's renewing, life-restoring, transforming grace which was sent forth at the first Pentecost is still wonderfully free to visit the dark places of people's lives (our own lives to begin with), to bring healing, deliverance, freedom and peace.

Just as God's indwelling opened up for the first disciples a whole new lease of life which they set out to share so generously with others, so the same Spirit wills to see us become men and women who are more fully alive... men and women who ardently desire to share with others the gift of God's grace which has been so generously bestowed upon us.

Let us pray: *Kindle in our hearts, O God, the flame of that love which never ceases, that it may burn in us, giving light to others. May the resplendent light of the Spirit of Truth shine in and through our lives today to give fresh hope to the world into which we are sent to bear witness to Your Gospel!*

Amen!