

'Come Holy Spirit' is not a prayer to say lightly. It is all too tempting in a Church of England liturgy - in a building which is familiar to us and with hymns we like and with people we know and a general agreement that the service is going to end at a time we expect so we can get on with the rest of the day - it is all too tempting to feel that the Spirit of God can be both contained and adequately expressed in crafted prayers, in lovely music, visual riches and architectural splendour.

And how can we not give thanks to the God who gives such artistic gifts, who pours such beauty upon us, who inspires such creativity and supplies the technical skills for the writer, the stonemason, the glazier, the singer and the instrumentalist? The combination of setting and worship is a testament to the work of God the Holy Spirit in the lives of human beings and throughout all ages. Ancient combines with the very modern, as in new music, new liturgies, additions to our buildings, changes to our patterns. Daily the Spirit gives life to the church's prayer and worship.

But to pray 'Come Holy Spirit' is to invite God to challenge as well as to inspire, to disturb as well as to strengthen, to compel as well as to invite. Joel the prophet, quoted in Peter's words in Acts 2, promises relief, plenty, satisfaction, and the rain of blessing. But then he goes on to promise that the outpouring of the Spirit will bring 'blood and fire and columns of smoke...the great and terrible day of the Lord'.

The outpouring of the Spirit drives Peter and the disciples from safety indoors to the danger of the market place, proclaiming Jesus Christ right into the heart of the crowd who had put that same Jesus to death only fifty days before. He was not singing latin in a glorious building or a hymn taught to him by his grandparents at Sunday School; he was inviting the mob to put him to death if they dared. When the church prays 'Come Holy Spirit' we open ourselves to being sent, to offering challenge, to disturbing our communities and overturning our normalities.

The church has no choice but to pray this prayer and to take its consequences. Think of it this way. This can of petrol is, I can assure you, very safely contained. Churchwardens would be having several kittens if it were not. To pray 'Come Holy Spirit' is to let the petrol out to do its job. For the disciples at Pentecost that was to be empowered and sent out to speak good news in words everyone could understand, wherever they were from, whatever they were like. Jerusalem was the whole world. Every nationality and every type of person was there. The petrol of the Spirit, put into the right people, changed the world.

I love the description of the Christian as 'containers of the flammable Holy Spirit, bearing the instruction 'please ignite'. We do that every day of our lives of course, but in a few weeks the Churches of Beverley aim to do what the disciples did and speak the words of God in ways people will understand as we celebrate the Festival of Life. Can you pray 'Come Holy Spirit', take the top off the can and be ignited to invite someone to come and worship, to come to your group, to come to Saturday market on the Sunday? Pray 'Come Holy Spirit and you do not know what God might do. It would be simpler if you kept the lid on the can, of course.

It's not just about us drawing people to faith. The Spirit's work leads us to consider great and world events also. At Pentecost God the Holy Spirit is poured out onto a group of nationalities divided then as now by race, power, religion, economics and war. God the Holy Spirit is the creator Spirit, the one who brooded over the face of the waters, who sustains and heals creation. If we do not look at our broken world and weep, then how can we say we walk the way of Christ? The brokenness was symbolised by different languages which divided the world. At Pentecost those divisions broke down: everyone heard the same words and were drawn together as one.

In recent weeks we have seen much brokenness: a land devastated by natural disaster and lands crippled by war and faith and politics. 'Come Holy Spirit' is for the renewal of Nepal, Syria and Iraq. To pray 'Come Holy Spirit' is to acknowledge that God continues to grieve over a wounded world and broken creation, and that God, by the Spirit, continues to work with us, and through us, and despite us, in bringing healing and forgiveness and reconciliation through the life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. 'Come Holy Spirit' is about Christian Aid and the United Nations and every agency looking to bring help, healing, wholeness. It is about a handshake between a future monarch and a former voice of terrorism. It is about a new world.

I hope you are inspired and not frightened, because we cannot not pray 'Come Holy Spirit'. We can pray the words beautifully and timelessly, and so we should: to do so gives a glimpse of the glory of restored and new creation. But we should not think that such beauty is enough at Pentecost. For, as we heard in Romans 8, the whole creation groans to know the freedom given to God's children. Like Joel, and the disciples, we are called to make that known, whatever it may cost. We are invited to be containers of the Holy Spirit, to take the lid off the can and to say 'please ignite'. May we hear, and respond, and be inspired, and live then to God's glory, for Christ's sake, and in the power of the Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.