

## Sermon for Choral Evensong on Whit Sunday 2019

*Exodus 33:7-20; 2 Corinthians 3:4-18 - see*

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=427016797>

‘O King of Heaven, thou the comforter and spirit of truth,  
Thou who art everywhere and bringest all things to perfection,  
Treasury of goodness and life-giver,  
Come and dwell in us, cleanse us from all our sins,  
And save us, O Lord.’

This is the prayer, originally from the Orthodox church, one of the so-called ‘trisagion’ prayers, ‘thrice-holy’ prayers, which Godfrey uses as a vestry prayer before all our services at St Mary’s. It is a prayer for the Holy Spirit to come; it is in effect a restatement of that great line of the Lord’s Prayer, Thy Kingdom Come, which has been the subject of the ‘wave of prayer’ from Ascension Day until Pentecost. The prayer movement called ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ was originally started by our Archbishops, Justin and John, in 2016, and has spread out all over the world.

Even now, at the same time as we are worshipping at St Mary’s, there is a big outdoor service taking place on Stag Hill outside the Cathedral in Guildford, bringing to an end the nine days of prayer and celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit among the disciples, the tongues of fire on their heads and the ability, all of a sudden, to speak in a variety of languages; so that each person who heard them thought they were speaking in his or her own native language. It was described in Acts 2, one of the lessons this morning.

It is a time to celebrate; a time to be close to God. Being close to God, in the Old Testament, at the time of Moses, meant not being allowed to see Him, so great was the splendour of the Almighty. He led the Israelites, concealed in a pillar of cloud: and he showed himself to Moses in the burning bush; but the splendour, the glory

of the Lord, was so great that Moses' face reflected the glory of the Lord so brightly that nobody could look straight at him. He had to cover himself up, be veiled, when he came out of the tabernacle when he had been meeting the Lord. As we heard in our first lesson from the book of Exodus, no-one apart from Moses could look on the face of God and survive.

But now, as St Paul says, in our second lesson from his second Letter to the Corinthians, the veil has fallen away, because of the presence of Jesus. It's no longer the case that no-one can look at God and survive; because God is with us, God is in us. St Paul has this great idea of our being 'in Christ', which is a sort of upside-down way of saying that we have Christ in us - and the Christ that is in us is the Holy Spirit.

We pray, 'Come and dwell in us; cleanse us from all our sins, and save us, O Lord.' Thy Kingdom come. That Kingdom really has two sides to it. There is the Holy Spirit coming and dwelling in us, so that we are in Christ, which is a personal salvation for us as individuals: and there is the coming of the Kingdom which we pray for in the Holy Communion service, when we pray for that day 'when your kingdom comes, and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth' [Common Worship: Holy Communion Order One, Eucharistic Prayer E - p 197]: where we pray for a public salvation, we could say. Being in Christ is private salvation, and when 'justice and mercy rule in all the earth', that is public salvation.

The Holy Spirit is everywhere, public and private. 'Thou who art everywhere and bringeth all things to perfection'. Christians receive the Holy Spirit in various ways. We here are cool Northerners, I don't mean 'North of Watford', but Northern Europeans. Singing a Moody and Sankey hymn, and responding 'Amen' with feeling after a rousing sermon, is as hot as it gets for us.

But not far away there are ‘house churches’, Pentecostal churches, where they invite the Spirit to come, literally to inspire the worshippers, to get them to speak in tongues and reach heights of ecstasy. Gerald Coates and the Cobham Fellowship, which evolved into the Pioneer People and the Pioneer churches, had its origins around here, and Pioneer still attracts many people to worship in this charismatic way.

But still, we in the Church of England are cool customers. Just as Martin Luther wasn’t keen on what he called ‘madness’ or ‘Schwärmerei’ in other parts of the Reformed church, so in the 18th century in England, during the evangelical revival, at the time of the start of Methodism - which was, after all, originally an Anglican movement - Sermon 32 of the 44 collected sermons of John Wesley, (which all Methodist preachers have to familiarise themselves with during their training) is called ‘The Nature of Enthusiasm’, and is a sermon on that line in the Acts of the Apostles, 26:24, when Festus, the Roman governor, was questioning Paul, after Paul had explained the Gospel to him and explained how he had been converted to Christianity, Festus ‘said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself’; that is, you are mad.

John Wesley says, “... if you aim at the religion of the heart, if you talk of ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost’, then it will not be long before your sentence is passed, ‘Thou art beside thyself.’” People will think that you are mad. [Revd John Wesley, A.M., 1944, ‘Sermons on Several Occasions’, Peterborough, The Epworth Press: Sermon 32, Paragraph 1]

The term ‘enthusiasm’, in this context, is supposed to come from Greek origins, but John Wesley pours cold water on this supposed etymology. He sums up by saying, ‘Perhaps it is a fictitious word,

invented from the noise which some of those made who were so affected.’ [Paragraph 6].

If he was being too sniffy about this, and ‘enthusiasm’ was in fact derived from the Greek εν θεω, ‘in God’, and so, metonymically, ‘in Christ’, the word was perhaps coined to distinguish a sort of religious ‘madness’, as opposed to being completely bonkers. People could be perfectly normal and rational in the rest of their lives, but behave irrationally when it came to religion: in this they were being ‘enthusiasts’.

This was, of course, the time of Reason, the time of the Enlightenment, the time of John Locke and David Hume, of Descartes; a time of great challenge to Christianity as well as a time of evangelical revival. Today, as we look back on the Novena of prayer, nine days of prayer between the Ascension and Pentecost, today, if you have been following in the online app [<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/thy-kingdom-come/id1377639052?mt=8>, or website <https://www.thykingdomcome.global>] which the Church of England has provided, you will have been enjoying some lovely short videos of various church leaders talking about the implications of the prayer ‘Thy Kingdom Come’.

One of these videos is one of our two Archbishops, who between them dreamed up the idea of praying ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ in order to fill up the emptiness after the Ascension with a ‘wave of prayer’. That great wave is breaking now, on Whit Sunday.

There’s a video by John Sentamu, our Archbishop of York. [See <https://www.thykingdomcome.global/resources/day-6-prayfor-archbishop-sentamu-prayed-five-people-last-year-and-was-astounded-result>]

He recommends that you should write down the names of five friends, five friends who are not churchgoers, and whom you pray for, 'Thy Kingdom come', so that they come to 'know Christ', as Archbishop John says. I suspect that Archbishop John is a little bit 'enthusiastic', in John Wesley's terms. I would say, as a cool Northern European, that I can't 'know' Christ in the same way that I know any one of you. But I can know about Christ, and I can be open to perceive the operation of the Holy Spirit in my fellow-Christians and in our church.

Indeed, we often do say that we can see the Holy Spirit at work in our church. Why did Revd John Waterson stick out for the really beautiful and grand Frobenius organ, when the Diocesan Advisory Committee sanctioned only something far more modest? It was to the greater glory of God, and this wonderful organ has enabled us to make more music, more beautiful music, ever since. Again, it was the Holy Spirit at work in this and the other churches in this area in the Churches Together in Cobham and Oxshott meeting, which led to the creation of the Foodbank. Who knew? Who knew that, under our noses, there are dozens of people who have to face the choice between paying the rent and buying some food. Right here in Stoke, in Cobham and Oxshott, in the Horsleys, Effingham and Downside. In all these prosperous areas - who knew? The Holy Spirit knew, and inspired us to do something about it. Where will the Spirit lead us next? We must watch and pray. We must pray, 'Thy Kingdom Come.'

Amen.

Hugh Bryant