

Jubilee and the Holy Spirit: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 5th June 2022 (Pentecost)

Readings – Acts 2: 1–21; Romans 8: 14–17; John 14: 8–17, 25–27.

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever”.

Seventy years and a few months ago, a young woman was on an exotic holiday with her husband in Kenya. She was staying in the Treetops Hotel, which was literally a very fancy and well-serviced treehouse, watching the big game animals play on the savannah below, when she heard the news that, half a world away, her father had died.

The death of a parent, as many of us know, is a wrenching moment in life, when one's own personal world is knocked off its axis. What was different for this young woman was that she not only had to grieve as any child does a parent, but she also had instantly to become a Head of State, for this was the moment when Queen Elizabeth II succeeded her father, King George VI.

Among the many tremendous changes that have taken place over the seven decades since, perhaps the most profound has been that in the status of women. The world of 1952 was still a man's world. Women in positions of power were rare: Elizabeth's first cabinet had not a single female minister. It was essentially unheard of for a young woman – and Elizabeth was only twenty-five – to be in any position of authority in society except with respect to children.

It took remarkable strength of character to thrive in that context – and she did thrive, through staggering changes. Her reign began as head of an Empire that stretched from Malaya to Jamaica, and continues into the age of Brexit. China was an impoverished global backwater seventy years ago, while the now-disappeared Soviet Union was one of the world's superpowers. The Queen has seen two female Prime Ministers come and go, something unimaginable when she took office. Her reign began when homosexuality was against the law yet

eventually saw marriage opened to couples of the same sex. In 1952, the Pill had not been developed, Elvis Presley and John Lennon had not been heard of, human beings had yet to set foot in Space, and the world's few computers occupied vast sheds of tape reels and valves.

Only two Heads of State anywhere in the world, in the whole of history, have ever held their office for longer: King Bhumibol of Thailand, who died in 2016, and whose reign Elizabeth will, God willing, surpass on Monday; and the fabled Sun King, Louis XIV of France, who reigned for seventy-two years between 1643 and 1715. She has led, by any standards, a remarkable life, always governed by two lodestars: faithfulness and service.

As the Archbishop of York preached on Friday at St Pauls' Cathedral, a great leader must discern when they themselves must allow themselves to be led. The Queen has been led throughout her life by the pledge she made publicly on her twenty-first birthday, "that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service".

As well as being the Sunday of the Platinum Jubilee, today is the feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, when we celebrate the sending of the Holy Spirit to the disciples in Jerusalem.

The Spirit is God at God's most transcendent and otherworldly, blowing where it wills, and we do not know from where it comes or to where it goes. This is God, as our reading from Acts puts it, as "violent wind" and "tongues of flame". The Holy Spirit blows things down, sets things aflame, breathes new life into the stale. Yet the Holy Spirit is also love and peace, and it is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promises to his disciples in this morning's Gospel reading as He bids them a final farewell in His mortal life with His peace.

Dare we allow ourselves to see Holy Spirit in all its wildness at work in the life of the Queen, this profoundly traditional woman whose values were formed in a more staid and deferential age? To do so, we must be aware of two idols which tempt us to reduce our faith to a political weapon, luring us away from clear

spiritual sight. One is a ridiculous jingoism that demands that God is especially at work in one's own country and its institutions above those of others; its twin is a sour hostility sometimes lurking at the angrier fringe of republicanism which refuses to accept that anything good can come from Windsor Castle.

Let us see instead if we can discern in the life of the Queen the Holy Spirit at work in the life a faithful lay Christian woman, empowered in that Holy Spirit at her Confirmation eighty or so years ago. For if we do that, far from doing something elitist, we are undermining the idea that holiness is the preserve of priests and prelates. Indeed, we undermine the idea that living a holy life is inaccessible to any of us, for we allow ourselves to see that, through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, a rich woman can indeed pass through the eye of a needle.

We might well see the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the Queen who sought to make peace with her enemies, indeed, who made peace with a senior commander of the organisation who had murdered her favourite cousin in cold blood. We might see the Holy Spirit at work when in front those erstwhile enemies she famously used this phrase: "With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all." A wonderful phrase that without minimising the wrongs she had endured, also acknowledged that her family and her people had inflicted wounds as well as borne them, liberating everyone from the sort of weaponisation of historical judgement that mortgages the best possibilities of our future to the worst memories of our past.

What does all this mean for the futures of those of us gathered in St John's this morning? We live in a time of tremendous change, but we should not think that such change has not always been the lot of humankind. Within seventy years of that first Pentecost in Jerusalem, the Temple had been destroyed at the end of a bitter war and the Church of Jerusalem persecuted and scattered. Also, in those seventy years, the faith in Jesus Christ as Son of God had spread to the edge of

the Roman Empire and well beyond, as far as the Caspian Sea, as far as India, as far as Ethiopia. It is a strange modern conceit to think that we are the first people in history who have had to constantly reassess who we are as the world has continually changed around us.

The same Holy Spirit that animated those first generations of Christians with new and bountiful life in an era of bewildering change has animated the Queen as her world has repeatedly wobbled on its axis. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to the whole Church, to everyone here today, that will disrupt you in times of staleness and keep you constant in times of chaos.

Embrace this gift today, and regardless of what sort the times we will live through, and in all the inevitable tragedies and terrors of life, the Holy Spirit will lead you to truth, and peace, and love, and in the end to eternal life.

And now praise, glory, and honour be to the God of peace and the God of wildness, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.