Pentecost Homily

In 2017, Pope Francis spoke to a Space Station astronaut as he orbited earth. The astronaut said that what he most enjoyed in space was being able to “see God’s creation a little from His perspective”. You could not come up here and not be touched in your soul at the indescribable beauty of the earth, when you meet the planet turning peacefully on its axis, without borders or conflict, so awesomely beautiful and fragile. When you see the planet that way it makes you think “how we should collaborate to improve the lives of all”. We can recognize here something of the Christian contemplative tradition – getting a glimpse of the way God sees the world. In this glimpse there is a recognition of the fragility, the one-ness, and the interdependence of humanity and the earth.

In his encyclical, Laudato Si, Pope Francis has written of the importance of this contemplative approach to the present ecological crisis. The crisis, a time both of judgement and opportunity, calls for a careful reading of the signs of the times, a conversion of our minds and hearts, and the willingness to act in new ways. All of this the work of the Holy Spirit. To do the right thing, for the right reason, and in the right spirit will not come about through human effort alone. Grace must build on nature, and we must be redeemed and sanctified by the outpouring of the God’s Spirit: the Spirit given through Christ, who will hand over the Kingdom to God the Father, so that God may be all in all.

Recent popes have emphasised that The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of creation as well as the Spirit of redemption and sanctification. We pray both “Veni, Crator Spiritus” and “Veni, Sancte Spiritus”. The Feast of Pentecost reminds us of the creation and the sanctification of the world. In Jerusalem the disciples, with Mary, awaited the outpouring of the Spirit, and this was marked by what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven. In Genesis we hear: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God’s spirit hovered over the water”. An alternative translation says: “While a mighty wind swept over the waters”.

As God created the cosmos and filled it, He saw that it was good: “God saw all that He had made, and indeed it was very good”. Creation is sacred because it is created and sustained by the love of God – by the Holy Spirit. We do not worship nature, but we do worship the God who creates out of nothing and who redeems the cosmos from the effects of the Fall and of sin.

As we look to read the signs of these pandemic times and discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church and to humanity, there is a sense of judgement and of opportunity. Even while the newly found sense of solidarity in our country is now under threat, deep down we recognize the need to do the right thing, for the right reason and in the right spirit. As followers of Christ we know that because of our fallen human nature only the inspiration of the Holy Spirit will bring this about. This should give us hope, when the tendency could be to pessimism and a sense of disillusionment when our sinfulness becomes apparent.

The Holy Spirit is calling all humanity to protect and nurture, what Pope Francis calls, our common home. The Spirit calls us to this because creation is sacred and it speaks to us of God: because it sustains us now and into the future: and because the most threatened are the poor and the vulnerable. The Spirit calls us to change our attitudes and behaviours in a spirit that recognizes that all is gift. Everything is given to us through the generosity of a loving God: we are all called to be generous and not be self-possessive.

One of the many striking and challenging insights of Laudato Si is to broaden out our view of the ecological crisis. It is not just about the natural world and our relationship with it. This aspect cannot be separated from our social, economic, political and cultural patterns of thinking and behaviour. Are we doing the right thing, for the right reason, and in the right spirit in these different areas. Pope Francis uses the term “integral ecology” for this interrelatedness. The interrelatedness we need to truly protect and nurture our common home.

Perhaps in this time of pandemic we experience both the presence and the absence of this integral ecology. Perhaps this allows us to hear more clearly what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. We are faced with great uncertainties at this time, and the way forward is not clear. We will be helped by the reflections of the Vatican Covid-19 Commission established by Pope Francis, mapping ways forward beyond the immediate circumstances. The Commission will help discern the opportunities and judgements of this moment.

On this Feast of Pentecost we rejoice that the Spirit comes to us to overcome our fears, to assure us of the Lord’s presence, to bring a peace that the world cannot give and to send us out as disciples. “As the Father sent me, so I send you”. “Come, Creator Spirit”: “Come, Holy Spirit”.