



19 May 2024
The Day of Pentecost
Sung Eucharist
Acts 2 vv. 1–21
John 15 vv. 26–27, 16. 4^b–15

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After about four weeks at St John's College, I *think* I have an idea of how things are done. Honestly! I think have mastered '*the John's way*'. I have learnt that something has to be done at least *twice* to become a tradition. I have learnt how traditions are passed down from one generation to another and I have heard these portentous words a number of times: *we have always done it like this*. 'But why?' I might ask. '*Because it is the John's way*', comes the answer. Perhaps our guests from Sidney Sussex College, also have particular ways of doing things, and I thank them for doing things our way this morning.

We all have our habits, and traditions, and ways of doing things. Whether everything that we do here at St John's reflects exactly what was done in the time of Lady Margaret Beaufort is debatable. It comes as a shock to some that Jesus did not use the Book of Common Prayer and did not speak in Elizabethan English. Many of the things that the church deems to be *traditional* are actually relatively new expressions of faith and practice, nevertheless, we *are* connected to previous generations of christians through our shared history and our worship. We would not be here, if those who had gone before us had not witnessed to Jesus Christ, and passed on their faith to the next generation. We would also not be here if others had not stepped out in faith, and broken with tradition. Over time, traditions do change. I certainly wouldn't be here now if some traditions of the church hadn't been challenged.

The danger with the word *tradition* is that it can become a cloaked way of resisting change. It can be rigid and dogmatic and sometimes simply prejudiced. Here's a joke you've probably heard before: How many Anglicans does it take to change a light bulb? What do you mean *change*? That joke is so old, it is probably a tradition in itself. Continuity is important for the church, but *where* and *how* we find our continuity with the past and how we adapt to a different future deserves a little reflection.

Michael Ramsey in his reflections on the *Holy Spirit*, said that 'our *continuity through history* is shaped by the sacraments, the apostolic ministry and the teaching of the church, and the *Holy Spirit* uses this shape to reveal the works of God'. But, he notes, the Holy Spirit also acts in unpredictable ways: exposing, teaching, illuminating, judging, renewing.

The Spirit, he says, is still as it was and ever shall be, *the unpredictable breath of God*. We can get so hung up on what Ramsey calls '*fossilized traditions*' that new ideas and new opportunities are stifled. We put out the fire of the Holy Spirit before it's even kindled and we resist her unpredictability by setting our traditions in stone.

The Festival of Pentecost, is just a little bit anti-traditional, a little bit subversive and it's fitting that on this day of all days we might be a little nervous and excited about what the Holy Spirit might be working in us, and what the Holy Spirit might do differently. Someone once said to me that the Holy Spirit comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. After all the Holy Spirit is the *unpredictable breath of God*. We are told in the scriptures, that the Holy Spirit is like a fiery whirlwind blowing through the lives of all believers: wonderful and terrifying.

The same Holy Spirit is variously described as being like wind, flame, water. The Holy spirit is described as being like breath, like a bird on the wing, it cannot be tamed, or trained, or captured. T.S Elliot writes in The Four Quartets: '*The dove descending breaks the air, with flame of incandescent terror*'. We cannot domesticate or control the wildness of the Holy Spirit. When we sing '*Come down O Love divine*' and ask the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts, *do we realise* we are opening ourselves up to change and transformation and even unpredictability?

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Today we are reminded that the Christian faith is ultimately about a change of heart and mind, a *conversion of life* and *the transformation of the world*. A new song is sung, and it's sung in many different languages, by many different people and in many different ways. God's spirit is poured out upon all flesh, and there will be dreams and visions and signs and wonders.

Two thousand years ago, something new and shocking did happen, breaking with every tradition. The unpredictable breath of God was born in human flesh, and lived on this earth, eating with sinners and tax collectors, upsetting religious authorities, witnessing to a new kind of kingdom, dying on a cross, rising from the dead. His followers were bound together by the flame of the Holy Spirit and sent out into the world to proclaim what they had seen and heard. The experience was life changing. The church was born through a massive and unprecedented disruption.

The picture of the church in the Acts of the Apostles is a church on the move, a church without walls, a church doing something new and unexpected, a church which is not afraid of proclaiming the love, mercy and peace of God.

On this last day of the Easter Season, we again celebrate renewal and rebirth, another beginning in Christ. The unpredictable breath of God might be blowing through our lives at this moment—doing something new, something we're not expecting. Our plans for ourselves may be overwhelmed by God's plans for us. Things might have to change, heaven help us, we might have to change and do things differently. That is the risk of standing before the living God.

In every age, the church faces change and upheaval, but we can either retreat, lock the doors and bury our heads in the sand, or we could look up, start walking and let the Spirit lead us. The first disciples devoted themselves to prayer, they broke bread together with glad and generous hearts, and praised God. Long may those traditions continue, but at the same time, we pray: *Come Holy Spirit*, renew the hearts of your people, and kindle in us the fire of your love.

'The old order changeth', wrote Tennyson, 'yielding place to new, and God fulfils Himself in many ways, Lest one good custom, should corrupt the world.'

There are those who say that we navigate uncertain times by holding on to our traditions, but we might want to say, on this day of all days, we might also navigate uncertain times by holding on to Christ, to the glory of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.