

A Reflection on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12.3-13



The Apostle Paul here describes a series of ‘manifestations’ or *spiritual gifts* by which the Holy Spirit empowers the People of God. Sometimes they are described as *charismatic*, using the Greek word *charism*, which means ‘gift’. The focus is not on being *gifted* as such, so much as using the giftings for a specific *purpose*. Some of this becomes clearer when we compare St Paul’s list of gifts with the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit as described by the Prophet Isaiah:

*A shoot shall come out of the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,*

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah 11.1-3

In Isaiah's list of spiritual qualities, we should understand 'might' not as *forcefulness* but as *moral strength*; and the two references to the 'fear of the Lord' have differing nuances of *reverence* (a kind of holy *awe*) and of *wonder* (a kind of *spiritual delight*), which are distinct from each other.

We can immediately see that there is a large overlap between the two lists of gifts. There is a shared emphasis on wisdom and understanding – on *insight* – and on discernment and the genuine perception of what is true and real from what *seems* to be so or is apparent but *mistaken*. Both sets of qualities put an emphasis on *interpreting* things correctly – on not being fooled or beguiled or misled (especially by lies or fantasies or wishful thinking). We could say that there is a *practical* focus, perhaps a bit more obvious in the Apostle's list, with its description of *fruitful speech* and *healing*. In neither list is there anything self-indulgent or lacking in mature purpose and function. Even when the Apostle Paul speaks of 'speaking in tongues' – that is, in other *languages* – it is balanced by the need to interpret them, of *communicating* fluently where communication has so far been thwarted. This is an echo of the *Day of Pentecost* itself:

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Acts 2.6

It is a moment which puts right the distortion brought about by those who had built the Tower of Babel, seeking to become all-powerful, even as it is reserved to God to be so (cf Genesis 11.1-9). The gift of Pentecost puts right our *babbling* and our *incoherence*. Compare this with the coming among us of Jesus Christ, the *Word of God in human form* – the source and measure of *meaning*. The whole Christian faith is about the renewal of meaning and coherence and comprehension of things as they really are.

The icon in the chapel at Whalley Abbey expresses this *reintegration of all things* in words which are quaint, but evocative:

Forth from the Father he comes with his sevenfold mystical dowry pouring on human souls infinite riches of God.

May we be the recipients and stewards of these holy gifts, by which meaning and understanding and wisdom and perception can be restored and made complete. Alleluia – *thanks be to God*.