**Lent United Service March 10th 2013**

**Jesus and Peter: Filled with the Spirit/ there is nothing unclean**

**Acts 2.32-47; Acts 11.1-18**

When the list for leaders for united services was passed around I didn’t fancy the one with the title ‘He was naked’ which was last week. I’m sure Ian Robb did a fine job. I get to be filled with the spirit!

Jesus ascends to heaven and reassures his disciples that he will always be with them by his Spirit. In many ways it is to our advantage – I must go that the Spirit may come – instead of a bodily Jesus only being present in one place at one time; we have his Spirit always with us. It’s a good thing we don’t have Jesus.

Well I’m not so sure. It would be really good to have some help trying to convince the godless of Dursley that Jesus is worth following, if Jesus was here in person. Blessed are those who believe but have not seen.

They have these questionnaires in the paper when they interview celebrities and they ask questions like ‘what song you would have at your funeral?’ And ‘what was your most embarrassing moment?’ One question they often ask is who, including people no longer with us, who would you invite to a dinner party? I have to say I would like to get Jesus, Peter and Paul together. How they would get on together, never mind how they would relate to Tommy Boyle captain of Burnley’s FA Cup winning side of 1914 and Jimmy McIlroy the midfield dynamo of our championship team of 1962, is pure speculation. I would also have my Dad at the table because I’d like to ask him a few things that I never got round to asking him while he was alive. He died 18 years ago and never saw e as a father and I’d quite like to ask him how he coped with being a father. There are always people we miss, whose presence is no longer with us.

Jesus is no longer physically with us. The Christian faith says he with us by his Spirit. It’s not the same. There is that catchphrase that you can find on bumper stickers and wristbands WWJD – what would Jesus Do? Sometimes its plainly obvious – don’t be hypocritical, love your enemies, forgive, help the poor, give alms, although even in quoting the obvious there is a distinction between knowing what Jesus would have us do and us actually doing it. Then there is a whole raft of issues where it’s more complex and we are not fully sure what would Jesus have us do.

Faith requires a certain level of imagination. It is a call to be so saturated in the gospel stories and the teachings of Jesus that you can imagine him in various situations, and imagining how he would react, what he would say, where his Spirit is is leading us. To a certain degree faith is imagination. Faith cannot see physically, materially. We put our faith in what cannot be seen, the spiritual. We hope for what is not yet. We trust on God’s word. We step out in faith. In many ways you could argue that our faithless society is down to a lack of imagination. Maybe our society is so dependent on the visual image, computers, video games, handheld devices, film and TV that we are not stimulating the imagination and consequently the failure of imagination is leading to a lack of faith in God. We are a 2 Dimensional materialistic society. We can’t imagine the Spirit.

There is the story of an old man who was dying of cancer.

The man’s daughter had asked the local priest to come and pray with her father. When the priest arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The priest assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. ‘I guess you were expecting me’, he said.

‘No who are you?’

‘I’m the new priest at your parish,’ the priest replied. ‘When I saw an empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up’.

‘Oh yeah, the chair’, said the bedridden man. ‘Would you mind closing the door?’

Puzzled the priest shut the door.

‘I’ve never told anyone this, not even my daughter,’ said the man. ‘But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At Sunday Mass I used to hear the priest talk about prayer but it always went right over my head… I abandoned any attempt at prayer until one day about four years ago my best friend said top me, ‘Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here’s what I suggest. Sit down on a chair; place an empty chair in front of you and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It’s not spooky because he promised, ‘I’ll be with you always.’ Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you’re doing with me right now.

‘So Father I tried it and I’ve liked it so much that I do it a couple of times a day. I’m careful though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair she’d either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to a funny farm’.

The priest was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old man to continue on his journey. He prayed with and anointed him with oil.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the priest that her dad had died that afternoon.

‘Did he seem to die in peace?’ he asked.

‘Yes, when I left the house around two o’clock, he called me over to the bedside, told me one of his corny jokes and kissed me o the cheek. When I got back from the shops an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange father. In fact beyond strange – kind of weird. I found dad leant over and resting his head on a chair beside the bed.’

Imagination and prayer – the Lord is with us.

I’m doing a Master’s degree in Christian Spirituality at the moment and I recently did an essay on Children’s spirituality:

Definitions of spirituality are many and varied. Rebecca Nye Rebecca Nye, *Children’s Spirituality*, Church House Publishing, London, 2009372    suggests that spirituality could be defined as:

*‘Delighting in all things; being absorbed in the present moment; not too attached to ‘self’ and eager to explore boundaries ‘beyond’ and ‘other’; searching for meaning; discovering purpose; open to more?’*

She contends that spirituality is not something that likes to be confined in words – which make writing (and reading) about it troublesome! It is more ‘felt-sense’, drawing on non- verbal insights, vision, sound, touch and so on. It can be a powerful kind of *knowing* that is less about proving how you know.

She claims that children are more open to spiritual experiences than adults. However they soon realise that in our British secular society it is not ‘cool’ to talk about them. To be open is to be vulnerable and subject to ridicule.

A mother of a five year old boy in our church recently confided to me how her son had made a badge in Junior Church which had ‘God is with me’ written on it. He was very proud of the badge and wanted to wear it to school. His mother was wary, suspecting that her son would be ridiculed. The boy insisted on wearing the badge because what it said was true!

I remember when I was around the age of 5 or 6 I believed that I had an inner mouse running around inside me that I would talk to and think through what I was doing and feeling. ‘Mousey’ was my private confidante, director and friend. One day I told my father about ‘mousey’. He looked at me as though I was ill and needed the doctor. He said ‘don’t be daft’. Not encouraged by his response I never talked about mousey again.

Childhood is commonly perceived as the age of innocent naivety that needs to grow up into worldly sophistication. Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857) believed that human consciousness had three stages. Infancy was characterised as the religious faith stage. The youthful stage is concerned with metaphysical speculation. Adult maturity leads to scientific understanding. Such a prejudiced view is still prevalent.

As a Christian minister I am aware that Christian theology has also contributed to this despising of spirituality. In response to the Enlightenment, theology used rationalism to try and sustain theological claims. There was a suspicion of religious enthusiasm and a rejection of spiritual experiences as sources of theological truth.

I have a book at home called First Aid in Pastoral Care and alongside chapters such as drug abuse, sexual problems, high unemployment, suicide and breakdown is a chapter on the charismatic movement. The chapter goes on to talk about the danger of spiritual fanaticism. It talks about the narrow interpretation of the experience of the Holy Spirit and how it fosters subjectivism and emotionalism and a sense of special blessing for the spiritual few which leads to an exclusive and authoritarian approach and a superiority complex. It produces a culture of power, victory and gifts but little love and freedom to express personal identity. It often leads to splitting where the world is seen in black and white terms – good or evil, God or the devil.

Of course there are all those potential problems and pitfalls. However, the spirit gives life and empowers the church. The spirit turned defeated and despairing disciples into apostles of hope and good news. Quench the Spirit and you dry up and wither away. Grieve the spirit and you will mourn the loss of spiritual life in your community.

So how can we follow in the experience of Peter and be filled by the spirit and inspired by the Spirit.

Bishop m Michael suggest we need to witness to resurrection – give witness to the activity of God in one’s own life and in the lives of those around us – in other words be expectant – be expectatnty that god by His Spirit is at work in the world. Open your eyes. See where new life is being brought, life after death, resurrection hope. The second mark he suggests is therefore openness to the Spirit. We are encouraged by scripture to walk in step with the spirit, to seek the gifts of the spirit, to long for the fruit of the spirit. It’s a disposition, maybe even a waiting for the time when the gift will come, whatever that gift will be – for we can’t really tell the giver what the gift should be.

The third mark is a willingness to engage with the discipline of prayer, rooted in a faith community. These three marks are marks of a mature disciple according to Bishop Michael, and Peter exemplifies all three.

Peter had an experience of the Holy Spirit. Stuff does happen.

During one Alpha Course I led, we had a lady attend who I will call Glenda. She had not been part of church since her youth but events in her life had made her drift back into church and caused an openness to look again at the Christian faith. She desperately needed to feel forgiven. She was challenged on the Alpha Course to forgive herself and to be open to receive God’s forgiveness.

One morning she was sitting in her room and she used a prayer in a Gideon Bible that another member of the Alpha Course had given her. The prayer was asking God to forgive her sins and to receive the Holy Spirit. She prayed the prayer with great sincerity and the next moment she felt so warm all over. The room filled with a bright light. She looked out of the window and the skies were dull – it was all grey. The light was coming from within the room. And she felt a deep peace come over her. She knew in her heart the assurance of forgiveness. Reading the Bible was as though God was talking to her. Glenda had had a real experience of the Holy Spirit. Stuff happens – wonderful stuff.

Peter has a vision inspired by the Spirit in Acts chapter 10.

His vision in Joppa of God telling him that nothing is unclean is then followed by a request from the Gentile centurion Cornelius to come over to Caesarea to tell him the gospel. Peter preaches the message to a Gentile household. As he speaks the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his family, they speak in tongues and Peter baptises them. Back in Jerusalem he explains his actions to the leaders of the Jewish Christian church. God had given them the gift he gave us – who was I to hinder then work of God. The Spirit had been at work causing a huge change in outlook of those first Jewish apostles. The gospel was for all – no one was unclean. Their understanding of faith and who could have it was shaken to its core. The Spirit had disturbed the peace.

Notice that the biggest obstacle facing God's Spirit in this bold and gracious welcoming (in Jesus' name) is not the disinterest or resistance of outsiders, but the firm, inherited attitudes and understanding of committed believers who are convinced they know what is right, decent and permissible and who can or cannot be allowed in.

I can think of a church youth club that I know of in an inner city area. One of the older members of the congregation was widowed and childless and felt out of sympathy with the youth of her area. She felt vulnerable in her flat or out collecting her pension. When the youth group was about to fold for lack of a chaperone required by the Child Protection regulations, she agreed to do it – out of friendship for the youth group leader. She gave up her quiet Friday evenings with the TV for a headache – inducing evening with a gang of mainly boisterous lads. Gradually she grew into her new role and her new role grew her. Over time she became the unofficial grandma to many young people. Her gift with words made her useful for homework and her stories of wartime Britain contributed to many history projects. The youth group flourished and so did this lady. Initially entrenched in her attitudes to young people she found herself becoming open to change.

Peter’s attitude, belief and faith became open to change through dreams and visions, hearing God speak to him through these things. And then by seeing the results – lives changed, the Holy Spirit at work in people he thought the Holy Spirit wouldn’t be at work in. It wasn’t easy for him, or for the early church. And it isn’t easy for us today either.

I don’t like change. I like routine; I like to know what I’m doing. I like to believe that I’m right and I don’t like my opinions challenged. I find change in church life stressful

John Bell is coming back to the Tab in November 92nd and 3rd) you all welcome to join us. I remember the last time he came to us, five years ago now, describing the Holy Spirit as a wild goose – the ancient symbol of the Holy Spirit for the Celtic Christians. ‘Like a wild goose’ John said, ‘the holy Spirit can come unannounced, disturbing and provoking. He can be untidy and he often leaves a mess! Anyone who has been down to the wildfowl and wetlands centre at Slimbridge will know the mess geese leave – you certainly have to watch where you put your foot. But you also know the grace and power of the goose.

The issues of inclusivity Bishop Michael says are very pressing to the western church. The issue of exclusion on sexual orientation, the exclusion of women are but two hot potatoes he mentions in his book. Would I have another couple of hours I could explore some of them with you. I have recently led a discussion session at the Tab on these issues and indeed will be in the Old Spot on Wednesday this week, discussing them again.

Sometimes we have those new visions, new insights, new changes in our beliefs and understandings of God and the world. Yet we also live in a very diverse world and a diverse community of faith where people hold, very sincerely, different views. Whilst the spirit guides us into all truth the highest prized gift of the Spirit is love. Love that bears with one another. Love that is patient and kind and not rude nor self-seeking and is not easily angered.

Two persons were talking together before a large church which was being destroyed by fire. The first man spoke in a voice which could be heard above the voice of the firemen: "This is the first time I ever saw you at church." To this the second responded: "This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire."

There are many prophets of doom saying that the age of the Christian Church is over - that it has lost its zeal! We're taking a beating right now in this country. Our theology is being questioned. Sociologists doom us. If we do go down - let’s go down blazing. Let’s make sure there is fire in our midst, the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Leslie Weatherhead was an outstanding English Methodist preacher and writer who tells of a visit to Aldersgate in London where John Wesley had his transforming conversion experience. In this small chapel he saw a plaque on the wall that read: "On this spot on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed."

As Weatherhead prayed and pondered about Wesley's "warmed heart" in one of back pews suddenly the chapel door opened and an old man with a cane proceeded to walk down the aisle. When this man came to the plaque, not seeing Weatherhead in the back pew, he read out loud the words: "On this spot on May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed." The old man dropped to his knees and exclaimed, "Do it again, Lord! Do it again for me!"

**United Lent Service Order of Service United Lent Service Order of Service**

Call to worship

**372 Come Down O love divine**

Prayer

Acts 2.32-47

**393    She sits like a bird**

Acts 11.1-18

**397    The spirit lives to set us free**

Sermon

**564 O thou who camest from above**

Prayers of intercession

**409    let us build a place**

Blessing

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**Call to worship**

O God, you look on humanity with mercy and kindness, and through your Son Jesus Christ, bring us to completeness of life.
**With a whole heart we worship you, Lord, and commit ourselves to your loving service.**O God, you care for the excluded and the vulnerable, and enable them, through your Spirit, to share fellowship with their brethren.
**With a whole heart we worship you, Lord, and commit ourselves to your loving service.**
O God, you lift up the weak and the lowly, and with awesome power give a multiplicity of gifts to humanity.
**With a whole heart we worship you, Lord, and commit ourselves to your loving service.
Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

In many communities, men and women of faith proclaim you as the living God, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in praise of you.

For in you, O Lord, we gain access to fullness of life.
Your allure is like the radiance of the sun that shines over hills and valleys, across the landscape near and far, displaying your splendour.
In you, O Lord, we find beauty and majesty,
so let all the people give glory and power to the king of kings.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

Holy God, you call us to operate beyond our comfort level,
to face challenges that cause our faith to rise to new heights
and overcome obstacles that become stepping stones over rough waters.
Thank you for your grace, and your promise never to leave nor to forsake us.
Your words give us the confidence to act in faith
to bring into the present the 'not yet' as though it were already done.
You are great in all your ways, and we trust in your name.
**Amen**

**outline with opportunities to add the details of local, global and contemporary concerns.**

O God, our maker, you are worthy of praise and glory
from all that dwell in heaven and on earth.
You alone called everything into being.
We pray for your Church that your children may be one.
And may we be your faithful servants that your will may be done on earth as in heaven.
We pray particularly for…

Strengthen your ministers, that your name may be made known on earth.
We pray for…

Alert us to the needs of others and equip us with the skills
to share each other's burdens as well as joys.
We pray for…

Inspire the leaders of our world.
Guide them – and us too – in the ways of justice and of peace.
We pray for…

Inspire us in our relationships with our families and friends.
Give us the skills to care for the sick, the sad, the troubled and the lonely.
We pray for…

Heavenly Father, we ask this, and all that we cannot put into words,
in the name of our Lord and Saviour, your Son, Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**

*For this prayer, ask the congregation to stand and get into twos. These pairs should face away from each other, representing the prejudice and divisions that are highlighted in today's story. Then, as each line is said and while they say the response below, the two should turn and face each other and come close to shake hands or hug, depending on what your church is most comfortable with.*

**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**

Dear Lord, because we have rebelled against you,
we are divided and are so easily separated from each other.
**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**

Dear Lord, because we do not know how to love you,
we have failed to love each other.
**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**

Dear Lord, because we have not listened to you,
we find it hard to listen to each other.
**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**

Dear Lord, because we have not looked beyond our own narrow borders,
we have failed to see how you are always at work in the world.
**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**

Dear Lord, because we have limited your love to our own narrow perspectives, we have shut out others from the experience of your grace.
**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**

Dear Lord, because we have closed our minds to how inclusive you are,
we have excluded many from the joy of the gospel.
**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**

Dear Lord, help us to step out of the box of a limited and short-sighted faith into the bright light of your love,
because you are Lord of all the earth and of all peoples everywhere.

**By your Holy Spirit, break down the barriers that divide us.**
**Amen.**

**Help us, O Lord, to love and welcome others as Jesus did.**

We pray for those who are different from us — who live in different places, speak different languages and live differently. **Response** .

We pray for those whom we find it hard to like; people who love to hurt; people who are our enemies. **Response** .

We pray for those who look different and appear strange to us — not the usual members of our church. **Response** .

We pray for those who make us feel uncomfortable, for those who are awkward or annoying. **Response** .

We pray for those we find it very hard to get on with, because they are so different. **Response** .

After a final pause, mix up the original draught pieces and the new shapes and colours so that they are all together as one group. Use these words to finish:

If God welcomes and loves them, then so should we. **Response** .

**A prayer of commitment**

Lord, we know you are a present help in times of trouble.
You are the keeper of souls, and opener of doors in unlikely places.
In culturally diverse communities, in socially deprived areas, among the poor and marginalised, you usher in rays of hope that brighten their future and your Spirit witnesses to the risen Christ.
**To God be the glory.**

Lord, we present ourselves in worship, and totally commit ourselves to serving you.
We pray that your kingdom may come on earth as in heaven.
We give of our resources to bring about the transformation you wish to see, for you bring the neglected out of their deprivation and restore land to the needy.
Give us the strength to go to unlikely places in your name and willingly to make ourselves available at your call, so that by your Spirit we may indeed witness to the risen Christ.
To God be the glory.
**Amen.**

* [Previous prayer](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/Lectionary/23May-June/Easter6/prayeractivity)

A prayer for strength

Lord God, we struggle to make a difference in the places where we are.

Help us to apply ourselves daily to this task, not merely occasionally.

Keep us close to you, for at times we are afraid of the unknown.

We do not feel equipped for the task ahead and lack the strength to face the struggles of life.

Remind us that in our weaknesses you are strong, that your power may come alive in us and drive away every fear.

Amen.