



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 19th May 2024

Readings: *Acts 2.1-21; Matthew 25.14-29*

Pentecost

Today is the fortieth anniversary of the death of former Poet Laureate, John Betjeman. Rather different in style from the incumbent, Simon Armitage, Sir John would often gently poke fun, not least at Anglicans, of whom he was one, and at Calvinists, whom his nurse had taught him to fear. It has been said that his atypical poem, *Executive*, 'captures the disillusionment and alienation of post-war life, mirroring the social and cultural changes in post-war Britain.'¹ This is how it begins:

*I am a young executive. No cuffs than mine are cleaner;
I have a Slimline briefcase and I use the firm's Cortina.
In every roadside hostelry from here to Burgess Hill
The maîtres d'hôtel all know me well, and let me sign
the bill.*

*you ask me what it is I do. Well, actually, you know,
I'm partly a liaison man, and partly P.R.O.
Essentially, I integrate the current export drive
And basically I'm viable from ten o'clock till five.²*

I don't think that's the one that made him Poet Laureate.

Amongst the careers represented in the membership of Downing Place Church, some of you have been executives, even Chief Executives. The Cambridge Dictionary tells me that is 'the person with the most important position in a company or organization.'³ Well, maybe that is how Chief Execs see themselves, and maybe it isn't. By contrast, from the banking world I also learn that 'a *non-executive* director will spend their time scrutinising business performance and offering strategic guidance and support to the executive team.'⁴ So, the former does the work, and the latter checks up on it! *Each* of them committed to functioning well is key to a society's flourishing, and in the church, even as we so frequently pray with doctors, nurses and teachers, we do well to seek God's blessing for those who strive for the prospering of industry, commerce, service industries, and, the third sector. However clean their cuffs, being an executive brings great responsibility, whether one is running the Bank of England, or the Village Savings and Loans Association in Aline Nibogora's Burundian district.⁵

Thinking now theologically, it has been said that 'the executive factor in the ebb and flow of life is the Spirit of the Lord.'⁶ On this Pentecost Sunday we are invited to understand the Holy Spirit as a way of recognising God's executive function; the way in which God is at work. You see, God is not just an idea, to be argued about – though that can be stimulating; God is not a relic of history, only to be found in museums that honour what used to be; God is not an absentee landlord, only remotely interested in us as creation's tenants, when we double what God has invested in us; God is not even a non-executive director, occasionally overseeing what we do day-by-day.

No, God, as we experience God in the Holy Spirit, is at work – constantly at work - in the world here and now. As that scholar has it, 'The executive factor in the ebb and flow of life is [that] Spirit of the Lord.'

Looking in the Bible, we can find this executive aspect of God working in a whole host of ways, depending upon whose narrative we are reading. So in *Genesis*, the Spirit is creator of all that is, begetter of life;⁷ in *I Corinthians*, the Spirit is our source of faith by whom alone we can say in Jesus Christ as Lord;⁸ in *Galatians*, the Spirit gives the luscious fruit that leads to wholesome relationships – love, joy, and peace; patience, kindness, and generosity; faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control;⁹ in *Acts*, the

¹ Available at <https://allpoetry.com/Executive>; accessed 19th May 2024

² Betjeman, John (1906-84) *Executive*, from the 1974 anthology, *A Nip in the Air* London: John Murray

³ From the website, *Investopedia*, available at

<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/ceo.asp#:~:text=Key%20Takeaways,overall%20operations%20of%20a%20company>. Accessed 17th May 2024

⁴ From the website of *Inform Direct*, available at [https://www.informdirect.co.uk/officers/non-executive-](https://www.informdirect.co.uk/officers/non-executive-director/#:~:text=A%20non%2Dexecutive%20director%20is,not%20an%20employee%20of%20it)

[director/#:~:text=A%20non%2Dexecutive%20director%20is,not%20an%20employee%20of%20it](https://www.informdirect.co.uk/officers/non-executive-director/#:~:text=A%20non%2Dexecutive%20director%20is,not%20an%20employee%20of%20it). Accessed 17th May 2024

⁵ See the Christian Aid Week 2024 theme, *Extraordinary Love*, as in the DVD available at

<https://christianaid.resourcespace.com/pages/view.php?ref=10741&k=4e1e8ad587>, and accessed 17th May 2024

⁶ Motyer, Alec 1994 *The Prophecy of Isaiah* London: IVP, page 300

⁷ Genesis 1.1ff

⁸ I Corinthians 12.3

⁹ Galatians 5.22f

Spirit is the enabler of coalition, connecting what Michael Welker calls ‘intense experiences of individuality with a new experience of community’, enabling ‘a ruptured world to grow [back] together’;¹⁰ in *Isaiah*, the Spirit prods timorous and bold ones alike to prophesy – it’s the ‘divine energy underwriting’¹¹ what the Lord’s messengers feel called to say; in *Acts*, the Spirit is motivator of mission, giving power to the disciples to be ‘witnesses [where they are, and also] to the ends of the earth’;¹² in the *Fourth Gospel*, the Spirit is a teacher, as well as the bestower of forgiveness.¹³

As we learn of Aline Nibogora, we discover how she ‘has persevered against the odds, persisting in faith, hope and love, even when pushed to the brink by extreme poverty.’¹⁴ She is a person of faith, nurturing that same trust of God in her three sons, Fisto, Vyukasange, and Irumva. Repeatedly watching her story, I have sensed that she is a Pentecost person – one whose dependence upon and personification of God’s extraordinary love, is surely indicative of the Spirit making her who she is. One might even say that ‘the executive factor in the ebb and flow of [Aline’s] life is the Spirit of the Lord.’ In Aline we see that readiness to learn new skills which comes from openness to the teaching Spirit. Her creation and leadership of the saving group in her Makamba Province village was not just a new skill to her, but a facility unprecedented in that community. The Spirit does indeed ‘live to set [Aline and her village companions] free’.¹⁵ In Aline we see that faith which comes from the work of the Spirit taking her beyond mere knowledge to a trust that, come what may, God is God, God is Love, ‘Extraordinary Love’. In Aline we see that commitment to community which comes from being pliable to the work of the Spirit, preventing us becoming suffocated by selfishness and enabling us so to give ourselves that society’s ruptures are healed. In Aline we see that care which is born of knowing first-hand what suffering is like and thereby understanding how compassion works – that solidarity inspired by the Spirit which doesn’t walk by on the other side,¹⁶ but knows the ultimate truth that ‘a trouble shared is a trouble halved’, and that we cannot say we love God whom we have not seen if we do not love the sibling who is struggling right beside us.¹⁷ In Aline we see that readiness to change which is a response to the Spirit that rarely leaves us where it finds us, constantly seeks to breathe new life into old bones,¹⁸ new hope into shattered dreams.

And if that is true of Aline, for whom home and livelihood were once threatened, but who has been blessed with new and abundant life, how might we be Pentecost people, fired by the Spirit? That is not a question for me to answer on your behalf. Each of us - with different experience and age, different aptitude and opportunity, different circumstance and opportunity– is invited to ask God to awaken us to what we can be, what we can do. What’s right for one, won’t be right for another; what’s right for me, won’t be right for you. And such is the variety of the Spirit’s gifts,¹⁹ that there is a role for each of us, whether we are full of vim and vigour, or confined to a chair from which to pray: that role might be high profile and up front, like preaching and prophesying; it might be fundamental yet more hidden, like caring, and cleaning, and administering,²⁰ and all, just as we see in Aline, crowned with the those gifts of the Spirit that abide most resiliently, ‘faith, hope and love, of which the greatest is love’.²¹

Our service began with us borrowing words from eleven hundred years ago – we sang,

‘Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire’.

But the writer goes on to borrow in turn from the prophet Isaiah.

¹⁰ Welker, Michael tr John F. Hoffmeyer *God the Spirit* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock pages 233 and 231

¹¹ Motyer, 300; Isaiah 40.6-8

¹² Acts 1.8

¹³ John 14.26, 20.22f

¹⁴ See material for Christian Aid Week 2024, available at <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/notes-for-preachers-and-speakers-caw-2024.pdf> Accessed, 17th May 2024.

¹⁵ from the eponymous hymn by Damien Lundy 1944-97 at Mission Praise 664.1.1

¹⁶ cf Luke 10.31, 32

¹⁷ I John 4.20

¹⁸ Ezekiel 37.1ff

¹⁹ cf I Corinthians 12.4

²⁰ I Corinthians 12. 28,

²¹ I Corinthians 13. 13

Do you remember going on to sing:

*Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire;
thou the anointing Spirit art, who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart?*

Those 'sevenfold gifts' of the Spirit refer to what Isaiah suggests will be found in the Messiah: ²² wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

Even as we recognise that septet of gifts are not just for the Messiah, and in our first hymn prayed for them ourselves, so we acknowledge how this Holy Spirit comes to offer us both the building up of our inner spiritual life, and the enabling of our outward-facing life of good work.

Those sevenfold gifts are echoed the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer: your kingdom come, your will be done, give us today our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.

And so it is that our prayer is rather like I imagine Aline's to be: to be accepted just as we are, and to be equipped by the Spirit for what God wants us to become, as we invest our talents, not to prosper us but to serve the kingdom and to bless the community.

Even as we pray that way we ensure that Pentecost is no mere remembrance of days gone by, but the spur to living our life for others here and now, just as God does in Jesus Christ. Moreover, that will be an executive life rather more worthwhile than Betjeman's Cortina-driver.

May it be so, and to God be the glory, Amen.

N. P. Uden

19th May 2024

²² Isaiah 11.1-3