

## Sermon for Christ Church Cathedral

Pentecost Sunday 15 May 2016

Ps 104: 25-35.37; John 14:8-17, 25-27

Come, Creator Spirit, and renew the face of the earth (see Ps 105.30)

Today is one of those days when I wished that the choir had been allowed to sing the whole psalm and not just a few verses. Psalm 104 is the perfect hymn for Pentecost Sunday, the day when we focus on one of the ways that we believe in God: as Holy Spirit, Creator-Spirit, the giver and lover of life. The psalmist finds reasons for praise everywhere in the cosmos: the light of the sun, the skies, the clouds, the wind, the soil, fire and water, mountains and valleys, birds, animals and sea creatures, trees and plants, grass for cattle and the harvests that provide us with food, wine and oil. The verses we heard today pick up this litany of praise at the sea creatures. They then go on to tell how the life in every creature is breathed into it by God and that when God withdraws that breath creatures die and return to dust. Wonderfully though, God continually breathes again and there is fresh creation and the face of the Earth is renewed.

The idea that Earth has a face is interesting. It suggests that Earth is somehow personal and this helps us to develop an empathy with Earth, rather than seeing Earth merely in terms of 'natural resources' there for us to exploit. We have inherited from our Jewish religious ancestors a certain wariness about personifying the Earth, in case this might smack of worshipping Earth as a goddess. However, one of the great Christian leaders in our day, Pope Francis, has no inhibitions about referring to 'our Sister, Mother Earth'. In doing this he is, of course, quoting his patron saint, Francis of Assisi. Last year Pope Francis wrote a wonderful letter called *Laudato Si'*. This letter is addressed not only to Roman Catholics, or to Christians, or even just to all who believe in a Creator God (L.S. 246), but to the whole human family. The letter is about 'Care for our Common Home' Significantly, Pope Francis chose Pentecost Sunday last year as the day for its release, the day when Christians all over the world would be sending up the cry to God, 'Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.'

The face is the most expressive part of the human body. A person's face will frequently indicate that they are ill or in distress. Someone can have pain written

all over their face. Pope Francis suggests that this is how the face of the Earth looks today.

[The Earth, our sister] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. [Our] violence . . . is reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.<sup>1</sup>

This is context from which Christians all over the world today are crying out to God, ‘Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the Earth.

Now all of this might seem a bit down beat for Pentecost Sunday, the fiftieth day of the great festival of Easter. Thinking about the ecological crisis can make us feel powerless and overwhelmed. We are implicated, simply because we happen to live in the economically advantaged third of the world that has done the most damage to the environment, yet has been able to afford, so far, to shield itself from the worst effects. Whenever we go grocery shopping we are confronted with all sorts of ethical dilemmas—to do with food miles, packaging, sustainable food production, fair trade, etc. The complexity of issues involved can paralyse us. But, this is where the particular understanding of the Holy Spirit that we find in the gospel of John can give us real empowerment. Jesus makes some amazing promises in the passage chosen for this Pentecost Sunday. The Holy Spirit—the same Spirit that breathed the creation into being—will be with us for ever. The risen Jesus has breathed that Spirit into us, so the divine energy that created the world is in us. When Jesus breathed that energy into his disciples, he said something that is not all that easy to understand.

‘Receive the Holy Spirit.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;

if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:23)

What might this mean for us today when we think about the state of the planet? Well, Jesus had already told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would convince the world of its sin (John 16.8). It may well be that the Spirit is getting through

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<sup>1</sup> *Laudato Si’* 2. Available online at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). Paperback edition, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2015.

to us today—convincing us that damage done to the integrity of the Earth is sin. If we refuse to act, our sin remains. To the extent that we share in Jesus’ work of re-creating the world, that sin is taken away. At every eucharist we pray, ‘Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us . . . grant us peace.’ Peace, as understood in the Bible, means wholeness, health, integrity, flourishing—a gift not just for human beings, but for the whole creation.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will teach us everything. When we are confronted with challenges—like the present pathetic condition of the face of the Earth—the Spirit will prompt us to remember the things Jesus said and did so that they can resource us to respond creatively and effectively. Jesus’ mission can be summed up in his words, ‘I came that they may have life and have it abundantly’ (John 10.10). This is the mission that he hands on to those who believe in him. ‘You will do that life-giving work that I have been doing,’ he says, ‘and, actually, you will do even greater works.’ One of the most influential ecology books written back in 1999 by Thomas Berry is called *The Great Work*. Berry says there that as we face into ‘The Great Work’ that the ecological crisis calls for, ‘we must believe, that those powers that assign our role must in that same act bestow upon us the ability to fulfil this role. We must believe that we are cared for and guided by the same powers that brought us into being.’<sup>2</sup> That is some empowerment!

If you would like to learn more about why ecological concern is essential to Christian faith, why not go along to some of the forty five events that are taking place over the coming week across 13 locations in Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow for Ecumenical Bible Week. It begins today and its theme is ‘In the beginning God created...’ (Gen 1.1): The Gospel and Care of our Common Home. There are leaflets about it at the cathedral’s welcome desk.

Later in this service the choir is going to sing a contemporary setting of a twelve hundred year old hymn, *Come Creator-Spirit*. At one point the composer asks the singers to produce a kind of Babel effect—the confusion that resulted when human beings lost the run of themselves and tried to build a tower reaching to heaven (Gen 11:1-9). Eventually the chaos gives way to the sound of the whole Earth praising God with one voice. As we enjoy this musical depiction of Pentecost as a reversal of the Babel story, perhaps we might listen to it in an ecological mode. We might think of ‘The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor’ as environmental chaos takes hold of our world: rising sea levels, extreme

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<sup>2</sup> Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 7.

weather events, desertification, deforestation, the environmental destruction caused by war. And then, as the dissonance moves towards resolution, we might sense Earth's 'soiled face' being anointed and cheered as the Holy Spirit breathes anew in the world, inspiring all people of good will with divine energy for 'The Great Work' that they are called to do.

Come, Creator-Spirit, teach us how we can share in your work of renewing the face of our sister, Mother Earth.