

The Christian Community

MOVEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

Forest Row Congregation

Newsletter for Whitsunday, 31st May, 2020

Letter

When during Passiontide, the Lockdown began, I did not conceive it as possible that we would still be here at Whitsun. I braced myself and struggled with my disbelief that Easter would (for the first time in history since the early persecutions?) not be publicly celebrated amongst us. Was Easter to sacrifice itself for this crisis? Was Christ in some way sacrificing Himself again?

I accepted that this was a mystery beyond my understanding. But I could not imagine that at Whitsun, the festival of human community, we would be 'social distancing' and some would still be confined to isolation, and the church still far off from being permitted to open.

The festival of the human spirit, the festival of human community, the festival of human speech, the festival and celebration of human freedom: all to be celebrated behind locked doors, just as the first disciples had to - until Whitsun.

It seems to me to me that we are currently in the most existential time in human history since Golgotha. Those great archetypes that the Christian Mystery speak of, seem to me to be completely alive now, whether we want them or not. Until now, we had had to seek out the Mystery if we wanted it. Now the Mystery has come to us, it has sought us out.

So now, behind (relatively) locked doors, we must celebrate Whitsun in (relative) isolation. Has the spiritual world determined that we are not yet ready to truly celebrate a festival of the human spirit and of freedom and of speech? Must we wait - must we still nurture the inner life longer before we may dare speak or act as free human beings in freedom?

I don't know. But it seems to me that we now have more time to see how we meet each other as human beings when we return. Will everything go 'back to normal'? Is that what we are actually wanting? Of course, we want our freedom to see and greet each other again, to speak and be heard, to really experience a human embrace. But I feel that it will be necessary that we are changed when we return. I feel that it would be a wasted opportunity if we

What is happening at The Christian Community?

All public events have been cancelled because of the new Coronavirus.

The priests are available by phone or email for pastoral conversations or to give advice about where to find practical help.

We are sending out a weekly newsletter by print and email with spiritual guidance and study material. The priests are celebrating the Act of Consecration of Man at 9am on Thursdays and Fridays and 10am on Sundays. The service will be celebrated for Whitsun on 31st May, 1st and 2nd June at 10am.

Please join us in spirit.

For more information about The Christian Community, please see our website
thechristiancommunity.co.uk

suffered this deprivation of human company and basic freedoms if we just speak and listen as before. If we think and act as before. When I say this, I am thinking of myself foremost. Perhaps others may feel the same.

There will be many differing opinions about this whole event which has taken from us our community time and space of 'worship'. There will continue to be many differing perspectives and viewpoints going into the future. The danger, I feel, will increase that we may polarise in our different views and ways of seeing things. Unless....

Unless, as in the spirit of Whitsun, we are able to gather around and share our differing viewpoints, and marvel that we can see the same thing differently. And all of them - if we are being true - are true.

We won't be fearful that others have had a different perception. It won't threaten our 'own' viewpoint and truth. We will enjoy listening to the varieties of human spiritual experience.

The future of the Human Spirit depends upon our good will to accept that the other sees things differently, and to experience that as an enhancement of one's own view - even when we cannot fully understand it. The future depends upon our grasping the spirit of our speech and the spirit of our listening anew.

- Luke Barr

From Son to Holy Spirit

The Festivals of Spring and Summer

Tom Ravetz

During these weeks of Lockdown, we have navigated the passage from Lent to Passiontide, and on to Easter and Ascension. On Sunday, we celebrate Whitsun, which ushers in a new period of the year – the festivals of the Spirit.

If we had been able to go into the church in Passiontide, we would have experienced the altar and all the vestments in black. This experience of everything being stripped back to its essentials – a reminder of death, when only the essential endures – fitted the prayers that we heard, which confronted us with our being forsaken and thrown back on ourselves.

From Easter Sunday, the altar has been dressed in red. This is complemented – literally – by its counterpart colour, green. We intuitively feel how these colours, symbols of life and love – reflect the mood of resurrection.

Now for the ten days of Ascension, the bright red received a new counterpart. The details on the priests' garments have changed from green to gold. New riches have been bestowed upon the earth through Christ becoming universal, spread out in the cloudy hydrosphere that supports all life on earth.

This journey through the festivals allows us to live every year anew through the stages of Christ's life: he unites with the earth in all its darkness; he resurrects from the depths and draws the life of the earth into the heights, not to escape the

earth but to imbue it with the new life that he gives us.

On Whitsunday, we enter a new world. The altar is dressed in white. The priests' garments are trimmed in yellow. The prayers speak of our relationship with the spirit, who heals and connects us. Our gaze is turned to our own present once more. What a change has taken place since Passiontide! There too, the rainbow of possibilities had been reduced to utter simplicity – not white, but black. Then, we needed to be aware of the desperate limitations of our situation. We cried out to the Spirit to help us in our isolation. Now, we notice that we have something to give. The flames that stream towards us recall the event of Pentecost, when the Apostles experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit as the tongues of flame settled above each one's head. Now, answering flames spring up within us which can join the joyous outpouring of life-giving, healing power.

To See a World in a Grain of Sand

A Whitsun Motif

Pearl Goodwin

These words of William Blake bring together one of the smallest things we can see with the universal, called by him 'world'. Looking at the sense world around us would seem to be the easiest and most natural of human abilities. Not

so, according to Goethe, or his great follower, Rudolf Steiner. For to truly observe means freeing oneself of all but seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching – that is, not allowing any thoughts or concepts, or feelings to arise about what is being observed. This is difficult when looking e.g. at a rose, not to feel its beauty and perfection while observing. Even to not know, to ‘unknow’ its name is necessary. That means suspending all but what the senses tell us, or, what the thing itself tells us. Usually when we look at something, the observation is followed, quick as lightning, by the thought ‘This is a rose’ Training oneself to wait, in stillness means that the rose might tell you itself what it is. When this happens there is a moment of being, ‘inside the rose’, of knowing what it is in itself.

This is a moment of grace, a union of human being and world, an overcoming of separation.

And that is one way of describing Whitsun. With it comes something else. The first Whitsun gave each disciple both the Holy Spirit flame of knowledge between himself and God, it was also the flame that united each of the disciples with each other, the foundation of Community. So when we are united with only a tiny part of God’s world, a grain of sand, or a rose, simply through steady and pure observation, it is not only a knowing that is given, it is also an opening of the heart, one human being to another. A small Whitsun, but containing the whole universe.

From ‘Henry von Ofterdingen’ by Novalis

“When,” asked Henry, “will the need for all fear, all pain, all want, and all evil be removed from the universe?”
“When there is only one power - the power of conscience. When nature has become moral and chaste. There is only one cause of evil - common weakness. And this weakness is nothing but meagre ethical receptivity, and lack of the love of freedom.”

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?”

Acts 2: 2-8

We have grown used to the picture of what it means to be human, which is embodied in the words: human being. If we see ourselves first and foremost as beings, it is a short step to the image of the isolated individual who has to do battle with others in the struggle for existence. Such images became a political and cultural undertone in the developed world from the late seventies onwards. One of the unexpected effects of the current public health crisis has been the realisation of the strength of

community spirit. Far greater numbers have volunteered than were expected; people have tried to help each other even across divides that had been thought unbridgeable. The response to the lockdown, blunt and imperfect instrument though it may be, demonstrates a willingness to put the public good beyond private gain. Perhaps it is no coincidence that just in this time we are learning more and more about how we are formed by and made for relationship, for community. Modern research on the development of the infant brain demonstrates ever more clearly how we grow into our humanity through what is bestowed upon us from without. The very first gazes of love and affirmation we receive from our parents and caregivers; the way that we learn to speak through hearing and imitating; finding our voice in a long conversation that has been going on since human beings were first able to speak, transmitting nursery rhymes and songs, poems and stories, technical know-how and wisdom down the generations – all of this makes us what we are.

It can be fruitful to spend a little time looking at our lives in this way, thinking of everything that has acted upon us from the outside. Parents, childhood friends, teachers, favourite authors – without these, we would not have become who we are. If we look our lives in this way every day

Whitsun Address

Tom Ravetz

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

for a while, we may notice that our perspective on ourselves begins to shift to the outside: instead of viewing the world from our standpoint, we start to see ourselves in the middle of networks of relationships.

However, it was not random chance that gave us the image of the individual human being, a self-contained entity. If we were only the sum total of the influences that have formed us, nothing new would come into the world. Not for nothing does every hero's journey begin with the call to leave home, abandon what is familiar and enter the wilderness where they can find a relationship to their own core. After the time of trials and initiation, they can return to the familiar world, bringing something new with them. The journey of every child into teenage years and beyond shows how each person has to recapitulate the journey of humankind, advancing from immersion in the group towards emancipation. We only need to think of the contrast between the world of a small child and that of a teenager to notice that becoming an individual means to begin with carving out an identity apart. The skull and crossed bones on the teenager's bedroom door under the notice that says 'Private – Keep Out' proclaims the arrival of the lonely individual who needs to taste the existential pain of separation. We all live in a tension: we need to find ourselves, be strong in ourselves, develop a sense of self as independent beings with their own impulses, following the dictates of our own inner worlds. At the same time, we grow and develop in relationship. We find meaning in our relationships with others, in their recognition of the contribution we make. There is a tender space in the middle where our individuality can unfold, perhaps best appreciated when we move out of it. If we only attend to the community, we lose ourselves, merge ourselves completely with those around us, and become ineffective. If on the other hand we insist on bringing our own impulses in our own way, we may become tyrants or else arouse such opposition that we are rejected.

The community of the disciples as we experience it in the gospels is not yet the beginning of Christian community. As long as Christ is there, the disciples defer to him and refer to his wisdom. The beautiful gospel readings from the farewell discourses that we have been reading in the Easter weeks are a prolonged meditation on a message, which is stated and restated in different ways: I am leaving you, and only

through the pain of that loss will you be empowered to find me within yourselves.

After Ascension, what the apostles have heard becomes their bitter experience. Thrown back on their own resources, they recognise the breach in their community, the consequence of their fateful division. They were not able to contain the forces of incomprehension and impatience which lived in many of them, so Judas took the step outside the circle and betrayed their beloved master. In recognising the gap left by Judas and choosing a twelfth one to replace him, they acknowledge the difficult past. After this, although they must have felt an incredible pressure of responsibility to inaugurate the new community, they become quiet. On the morning of the Jewish festival of weeks, we find them sitting quietly in prayer. This quietness gives them the capacity to notice the arrival of the spirit.

A new community is formed that does not rest on the Apostles giving up their individuality. The images move between unity and diversity with breath-taking speed. The one fire of the spirit separates into many tongues of flame. One Holy Spirit fills them all, but each begins to speak in their own voice. The people from many different countries experience the apostles speaking about the same thing: the mighty deeds of God, each in their own way.

If we visualise the scene in the upper room, even daring to imagine ourselves in the place of one of the Apostles, we might notice that there is no way of knowing that there is a flame above my own head. No-one was carrying a pocket mirror! As a grieving community, aware that they had not covered themselves in glory as the story of the Passion unfolded, we can imagine that none of them would have felt assured that they would receive a flame. The only way inking that I too had been blessed by a flame would have come from the way the others were beholding me. If we continue reading the Book of Acts and the letters that follow, it can feel like diving into cold water. There is an Apostles' Council; there are disagreements, wrangling, struggles. Do such things really belong in the New Testament? They remind us all too clearly of our own struggles in community, where we have to mediate between our own impulses and what lives in the community. How different from the world we experience when we immerse ourselves in the gospels! Our yearning that the world of the gospels could carry on for ever echoes the experience of the Apostles at Ascension, when

they have to take their leave from Jesus in the form that had known him. How wonderful it would be for our community striving if we could unite around the one true leader and follow them without question! But of course, sooner or later we would bump up against the limits to our own individual spiritual growth. The Whitsun event demonstrates how a human community becomes a vessel for the spirit. Although the community that is founded then is limited by the personalities and historical circumstances that form it, it shines out ever and again as a beacon of the human spirit that has opened itself for the Holy Spirit.

Astonishing and mighty as the Whitsun event may community comes about when I behold the flame of the spirit above my the heads of my brothers and sisters and see in their glance that I too might have be graced with the spirit. Such community does not override individuals but elevates them to a higher unity.

Gospel Study on John 14

Luke Barr

Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, "But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?"

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our dwelling with them.

Anyone who does not love me does not keep my words. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will recall to you everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world makes a gift. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be fearful.

"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no part in me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has given me as my aim.

Rise; let us go from here.

At Whitsun, the festival of human speech, we hear words from the farewell 'speech' of Christ. They are mysterious and sacramental in essence. They can be meditated upon. Every time anew, the words and the meaning reveal themselves in a different guise. They are - if we do not have the Act of Consecration's words to listen to - words which emanate from the same sphere as the 'revelation of Christ'.

They are words which we can return to again and again. We can spend time well allowing these words to resound in our souls. They are constellated in such a way as to unlock their power - our power - within ourselves. And as we do so, we find that the spirit grows within us. Not in some sensational way. Certainly not as a 'speaking in tongues'. But rather as it is here suggested. It manifests as a growing peace within us (14:27). The world gives us many things. Most of them we humans have started to buy and sell amongst ourselves. But this gift of peace cannot be bought or sold. It is a gift that the growing spirit within us gathers strength from. The peace unfolds. Our hearts are no longer 'fearful' (14:27), despite the fear that is all around us. The fear is the stamp of the 'ruler of this world' who rules the world and has dominion over all that is bought and sold. Only when we begin to rise above (14:31) that part of us which lays inappropriate value on the things of the world, can we begin to find the spirit within. It is rather that within us which is willing to 'go to the Father' - to stand at the threshold of death and not be terrified and seek to turn away - which is that which can overcome the 'ruler of this world'. The Christ will no longer 'say much to us' (14:30). Instead, our spirit will speak. Whitsun is the festival of our learning to speak as a spiritual being on earth. Whitsun will emerge in those days when all of the Apocalyptic things which He has spoken of have 'taken place' (14:29). Can it be that we are now in those days 'when it takes place'?

Fundraising

Angela Campbell's violin marathon has raised over £1500 for church funds so far. It's not too late to donate! Leave an envelope at the church, or go to thechristiancommunity.co.uk/2020/05/01/violin/

Living with the Act of Consecration (10)

Re-presenting
Tom Ravetz

The prologue of the Gospel of St John describes how the divine Word, the creator of all that is, becomes a human being on the earth. Step by step, Christ enters earthly reality. This process could be called the original sacrament: the highest spiritual reality takes on sense-perceptible form. Ever and again, Jesus foretells the bitter consequences of his decision to unite with human existence – a decision that stems from his love for human beings (eg Mark 8:31ff; 9:30-31 und 10:33-34). This decision culminates at the Last Supper when he shares his very being with the disciples in the form of the bread and the wine. Following this, he has to experience the utter isolation of human existence in the Garden of Gethsemane (see for example Luke 22:42). Christ's presence in the elements of bread and wine in the Last Supper becomes present for us in the heart of the Act of Consecration of Man. In the prayers preparing the Gospel Reading, we already lived into the sphere of Christ's life in which his words and deeds live on. Now this life unites with our earthly being in a new way. Words that recall the love of Christ that led to his suffering and death are the portal to experiencing this new being. Having spoken these words, the celebrant takes first the bread and then the cup and speaks words which narrate the actions of the Lord's Supper. She kneels down, breaks the bread and draws three crosses over the cup and the paten, the plate that holds the bread. The words and deeds of the Last Supper become our present experience. We have left the time which can be measured and which, starting with creation, runs from the past to the future (in Greek: *chronos*). We enter the time of potential and fulfilment, the time of which John the Baptist spoke: 'The time [*kairos*] is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand!' (Mk 1:15)

In the Offering we prayed that our soul-offering might be taken up into Christ's sacrificial offering. In the Transubstantiation, we ask that the body and blood of Christ may live in the offering. A first stage in the mysterious transformation of bread and wine seems to have taken place here: our offering has been ensouled and is now enlivened by Christ. The next step takes place when the bread is broken and Christ invites us, together

with his disciples, to receive body and blood with the bread and the wine. The substances become the bearers of the body and the blood. In the Gospel of Luke, after the sharing of the bread and wine, Jesus tells the disciples: 'Do this in remembrance of me'. (Lk 22,19) This translation of the Greek word *anamimnesko* runs the risk of making the celebration of the Lord's Supper nothing more than a reminder of something from the past, as it is understood in some churches. We can also hear it differently: Bring the past into the present. Let it become your present; let it become a living reality in the midst of your soul!

A member once described how during the Transubstantiation, he noticed that he was wearing his watch when it accidentally slipped from under his sleeve and the dial caught his eye. This was an experience that he did not wish to repeat; nevertheless, it was interesting because his shock revealed the ideas which he was unconsciously holding about the passing of time during the Act of Consecration of Man. Glancing at his watch, he realized that he would have expected either that it would have stopped, or that the hands would be moving so fast that they pointed at all the numbers at once. Such an experience points to the quality of the time that we are now entering.

In the Apocalypse the Christ says of himself: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, world-origin and world-purpose.' (Rev 22:13). The Transubstantiation not only connects the past event of the Lord's Supper with our experience in the here and now; it is a prophetic embodiment of a future reality. Bread and wine light up as icons for the whole earth, which is destined to be completely permeated by Christ.

Supporting us

The Christian Community is funded by contributions by members and friends. In this time of crisis, when the priests' work is needed more than ever, we are facing a fall in our income through reduced collections and fundraising events.

If you are able, please consider taking out a standing order or increasing your existing one.