

David Wilbourne's sermon for Trinity Sunday

Veni Sanctus Spiritus

Instead of the Creed this Trinity Sunday,

I'd like to use the hymn

Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire.

It was first penned in Latin

by Rhabanus Maurus

German Archbishop of Mainz in the 9th Century.

It was translated into English

by John Cosin

and published in his 1627

Collection of Private Devotions,

a little book specially written for the edification

of Queen Henrietta's maids of honour.

Imagine me penning a devotional tome

for the Duchess of Cornwall's ladies-in-waiting.

Cosin's action certainly went down well with King Charles I,
who promoted him

to be Dean of Peterborough

and Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge.

In fact anything with Peter in the title was Cosin's prize.

Just as well Peterlee didn't exist in those Stuart days!

Inevitably

someone who was a high-church

confidante of King Charles' Court

did not go down well with the Puritans and the Roundheads,

and during the Civil War and Commonwealth,

Cosin fled to France.

At the Restoration of the Monarchy

he returned to become Bishop of Durham,

as you do,

and included his translation of

Come Holy Ghost
in the 1662 Prayer Book ordination service
for deacons, priests and bishops.
Since then we have had prayer book revisions,
the 1928 Prayer Book,
the 1980 ASB,
Common Worship,
yet Cosin's 'Come Holy Ghost'
has remained
unaltered,
one of the few things,
if not the only thing
that has been untouched by modern translations and
fashions.

Cosin proved quite a cross prelate,

taking on Puritans and Roman Catholics,
never able to get either on board
the re-established Church of England.
All his activity and confrontations
have disappeared in the mists of time.
Come Holy Ghost remains
four centuries on
as his memorial.

As I say,
it is sung at the ordination service
immediately prior to the laying on of hands.
The archbishop kneels in solemn prayer
and sings the first line
at a moment of high drama.
Sadly one former Archbishop,

Robert Runcie,
couldn't sing a note,
and the moment of high drama
became one of high farce:
Come Hoooooly Gho-o-ost!

As Archbishop's Chaplain
I was standing beside my boss
holding the Primatial Cross at this moment.
Not a hands free activity by any means.
Which meant I couldn't hold a hymn book.
Since it didn't look right peering over my boss's shoulder,
and since I didn't wanted to seem like John Redwood
mis-miming the Welsh national anthem,
I learnt the words off by heart,
and they have gone down deep.

(Hymn 178)
Short succinct sentences,
flagging up a wealth of meaning
'Come Holy Ghost -
Veni Sanctus Spiritus,'
a sharp invitation
resonated in the Gospels.
'Come, the feast is now ready,'
the King's invitation to the wedding guests.
'Maranatha,
Come, Lord Jesus',
An Advent summons, coined by Paul.
No flowery invitation;
'Just come to me, Holy Spirit, I really need you.'
'...our souls inspire,'

seeing the Holy Spirit as the only source of genius,
inspiring Newtons and Mozarts
and each and every one of us,
a theme taken up by another Whitsuntide hymn:
'O thou light most pure and blessed,
Shine within the inmost breast of they faithful company.
Where thou art not, we have naught,
Every holy deed and thought
Springs from thy divinity.'

'Come...
...and lighten with celestial fire.'
Flagging up the first WhitSunday
and the tongues of flame descending on the disciples.
Set us on fire too, Lord,
the hymn implores.

Yet lighten can have another meaning;
lighten our load, Lord,
free us up,
burn away all the dross and the waffle
and the time-wasting pursuits.
Lighten us.

'Thou the anointing spirit art,
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.'
Anointing with precious oil
is an ancient custom,
still practiced at the coronation of our monarch
and often at baptism and confirmation and ordination,
signifying a coming of the spirit.
And the sevenfold gifts?
Wisdom,

Understanding,
Counsel,
Strength,
Knowledge
and the Fear of the Lord,
six qualities connected with God's Spirit
in Isaiah 11:2
with holiness thrown in for good measure.
Spirit, make us wise,
Spirit, make us understand,
Spirit make us give helpful advice,
Spirit, make us strong,
Spirit, give us learning,
Spirit, make us never take God for granted,
Spirit, make us holy,
In the kitchen at Ampleforth Abbey

is a text from St Paul's letter to the Philippians,
which catches these sevenfold gifts:
'Whatever is true,
whatever is noble,
whatever is just and pure,
whatever is loveable and attractive,
whatever is excellent and admirable,
think on these things.'
Below which some wag has scribbled,
'And please leave this kitchen as you would wish to find it!'
'Thy blessed unction from above –
back to the oil-anointing analogy again –
is comfort, life and fire of love.'
Comfort,
a gift of the spirit,

peace in the midst of calm.

The Bayeux tapestry depicts

William the Conqueror

fiercely prodding his soldiers bottoms with a spear

with the caption,

'King William comforts his troops!'

Another meaning of comfort,

comfortis,

strengthening,

goadng on.

Life too is a gift of the Spirit,

life in all its fullness

is our desire and our destiny.

And the fire of love,

another gift of the spirit,

do we burn with love for God,

do we burn with love for others,

or do we just simmer on a low light?

'Enable with perpetual light

the dullness of our blinded sight...'

Wouldn't that be a wonderful prayer

before every church meeting,

every meeting of the cabinet,

acknowledging that our cleverness and perception

is actually quite limited,

we need God's spirit to shed light on our darkness.

Isaac Newton,

who was probably the cleverest human being

in our island history after Jeremy Clarkson,

described all his discoveries

as little more than a man

standing on a dark beach by night

looking at the massive ocean with a candle.

Spirit, lighten our dullness,

our fumblings in the dark.

The prayerfulness continues:

‘Anoint and cheer our soiled face

with the abundance of thy grace.’

We all have dirty faces,

the grime of life,

worry lines which attract dust and filth.

In the end the prodigal son

was so broke and hungry

he gladly dipped his face in the pig swill.

Wash our life made dirty and dirty face

with your grace, Lord.

‘Keep far our foes, give peace at home,

where thou art guide no ill can come.’

A good simple prayer to put over the lintel

of your front door.

A good prayer to make

as you enter a difficult situation.

And then the hymn ends

as Pentecost moves to Trinity Sunday:

Teach us to know the Father, Son

and thee (i.e. the Holy Spirit) of both to be but one...’

The Spirit draws us to realise that God’s activity is threefold:

Creator,

Saviour,

Sustainer,

and simply to wonder at that activity,

to praise it.

We get hung up on the complications of the Trinity,

- although compared with some of the questions

on the A level Mechanics papers

I've been tackling recently,

it's not that difficult! –

but even so,

the hymn is saying

don't get stuck in a rut

trying to fathom it:

praise it.

When I see a hare running,

I don't have the biological and physiological knowledge

to know precisely how it works,

I just adore it for its speed.

When I drive in the car instead of cycling to Rievaulx

and feel the surge of the turbo speeding me up the hill,

I don't really know how that turbo drive works,

but I do adore it for saving me such pain.

'...that through the ages all along,

this may be our endless song:

Praise to thy eternal merit,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit...'