

## PENTECOST 2021

Some years ago I had the wonderful privilege of joining in morning prayer with some Vatican colleagues in the Sistine Chapel long before it was open to the public.

By any reckoning, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is one of the great artworks of the western world. It may therefore seem ungracious to point out that at its heart there is a highly controversial image. I am referring to the depiction of God the Father reaching out from heaven to give life to Adam.

Michaelangelo was only one of many artists who have tried to portray God the Father, and specifically to do so as an old man.

But how can that image be squared with the biblical assertion that *"no one has ever seen God"*? As we sing in a well known hymn "Immortal, invisible...hid from our eyes."

It is, of course, a deep human instinct to want to imagine (that is "to have an image of") what goes beyond our senses. But in doing so, we limit the reality - if it looks like, sounds like, smells like, feels like this, it does not look, sound, smell, feel like that.

You don't need to think very hard to realize that depicting God - and it would scarcely matter whether it was mineral, animal or human, old or young, male or female - is problematic because it presents a particular image of who God is and what God is like. That's just as true of thoughts about God as it is of supposed pictures or statues of God. God transcends every image, thought or idea we might have. And yet our limited minds do need images. So what is to be done?

One of the wonderful things about our faith is precisely that it does indeed square this circle.

When St John wrote the words I quoted a moment ago *"No one has seen God"* he went on immediately to say *"the only begotten Son....he has made him known,"* echoed by Jesus' own words *"to have seen me is to have seen the Father,"* which is why St Paul could write to the Colossians, *"He is the image (the Greek word is icon) of the invisible God."*

Images of Jesus, however conjectural, are obviously all right, because *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”* and it is in and through the human Jesus that we see the Father.

Now, I have to be careful here, because I do not want to cramp Fr Tom’s style for next Sunday, the Feast of the Holy Trinity, but I do want to start this morning by stressing that Jesus himself is the portrait of the Father. So no pictures of the Father please!

But what this morning, can we say about the Holy Spirit?

Well, here, some artists have gone further than Michaelangelo! There are even some supposed representations of the Holy Trinity, depicted as three male figures. Whatever distorted logic allowed some people to imagine God the Father as an old man with a long white flowing beard, there could be no justification at all to representing the Holy Spirit in human form. In the Bible, the Holy Spirit appears as wind (which you can hardly paint!), as a dove or as tongues of flame, so those might just about be tolerable. I might just add at this point that it is as bad to call the Spirit “he” as it is to represent God the Father as an old man. In the Bible, the Spirit in the OT is a feminine noun (a “she”) in Hebrew and a neuter noun (an “it”) in Greek!

Which brings me at last to the point of this sermon.

We believe in one God, the creator of everything that exists. We believe that Jesus Christ is the only earthly image of that God and we believe that that invisible God, made visible in Jesus, is still constantly active, sustaining the universe, illuminating our hearts and minds and making present throughout the ages the person, teaching and mighty acts of God performed by Jesus.

All this is the work of the Holy Spirit. There is something elusive about the Holy Spirit, something that cannot be tied down or too closely defined. As St John wrote *“The Spirit blows where it wills. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going.”* (Jn 3.8) This lies behind the advice given by St Bede, “the Venerable Bede”, whom we commemorate on Tuesday this week: *“Unfurl the sails, and let God steer us where he will.”* That’s a lovely image: we are like a sailing ship dependent on the wind, which in earlier ages made both direction and destination rather more unpredictable than they are today. We should allow God to fill our sails and take us where he wants.

As this morning's readings make clear however, this doesn't imply chaos, but order.

In Ezekiel, the Spirit comes to reunite and revivify the scattered dry bones that represent the desiccated faith (or rather faithlessness of) God's people.

In the Acts reading, the Spirit unites people from every corner of the world by enabling them to hear each in his or her own language the mighty works of God. The Spirit thus reverses the chaos created as a result of the Tower of Babel, when God scattered the nations, confusing their language, "that they may not understand one another's speech". The Church empowered at Pentecost is by nature a universal community in which human conflict and diversity are overcome - and of course what the Church is by nature it must constantly strive to be in the way it lives in this chaotic world. Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would lead them into all truth - that is to say, would guide them and help them interpret God's unchanging truth through all the changes and complexities of life. In doing so, he assured them that the Spirit would remind them of what he himself had taught them. Rooting them in what God has already done and said in Christ and leading them forward into a future they cannot yet see. "Remind" and "lead". So, you see, the Spirit makes us one with the apostles, the first witnesses of Jesus, and gives us a foretaste of the perfect knowledge of God which lies ahead of us.

But here is the most wonderful thing of all. The same Spirit who descended on Jesus at his baptism and remained with him, also came down on the disciples at the Pentecost with the promise to be with them for ever, has also been given to each one of us. Let me remind you of something St Paul wrote: *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?* Paul wants Christ's faithful in Corinth to understand that they themselves are the *living* dwelling place of the Holy Spirit among their unbelieving neighbours. Do you get the point? In spite of what I said earlier about the impossibility of representing the Spirit other than by tongues of flame or a dove, there is in fact a perfectly proper and indeed necessary image or icon of the action of the Holy Spirit. You. Me. Us together. No one has ever seen God, but God's Son Jesus Christ has made him known, and the Holy Spirit enables successive generations to see and know God in the face of Jesus Christ. How? In your face, my face and the face of the Church.

What could be more wonderful than that - or more challenging. If we do nothing else waking up every morning, let us at least pray that the Spirit might

make us an authentic image of Jesus Christ who is himself the perfect image of God. And let us remember the prayer of confirmation:

***Defend, O Lord, these your servants with your heavenly grace,  
that they may continue yours for ever,  
and daily increase in your Holy Spirit more and more  
until they come to your everlasting kingdom. Amen.***