

Whitsun / Pentecost 31st May 2020

31 st May Whitsun / Pentecost What we should have had.	9.30 Holy Communion	Numbers 11 vv 24-30 p148 Acts 2 vv 1-21 p1093 I Corinthians 12 vv 3-13 p John 7 vv 37-39 p1072	<i>Gloria in Excelsis Deo</i> Psalm 104 <i>Choir please choose five hymns.</i>
31 st May Whitsun / Pentecost What we should have had.	11.00 Holy Communion	Numbers 11 vv 24-30 p148 Acts 2 vv 1-21 p1093 I Corinthians 12 vv 3-13 p John 20 vv 19-23 p1089	EH 263 All Creatures of our <i>Gloria in Excelsis Deo</i> Psalm 104 137 Come Down O Love 367 Gracious Spirit 296 Lord Enthroned 361 (tune 322 Duke Street) Forth in the Peace

I've been a bit surprised lately by what seems to be the growing popularity of the Evening collect: *LIGHTEN our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.* After all, it is a prayer to use at Evensong and Evensong is a service we don't very often have in parish churches nowadays. They used to say that the BBC broadcasting *The Forsyte Saga* on successive Sunday evenings in 1967 killed Evensong. It attracted a very similar audience, who didn't return to Church when the series was over. Whether or not there is any truth in that, there are now many reasons why people don't choose to come to church on Sunday evenings (or mornings come to that).

And yet, before the virus at least, Choral Evensong in cathedrals and college chapels has been growing in popularity in recent years. The BBC Radio 3 broadcast of Choral Evensong on Wednesday afternoons attracts a wide audience. Even self-proclaimed atheists like Richard Dawkins love Evensong. Although larger numbers of people tended to come in the morning, even when we had sung Morning and Evening Prayer every Sunday in most parish churches, many people said that they liked Evensong better than Mattins. In fact, when I came here, they were already in the habit of pruning Mattins on those Sundays when we had it, thinking the service was too long, (which to me rather defeated the point of having it, our services having an integrity of their own designed to form us as Christians, not to entertain us).

But why this growing popularity of Evensong? They were conducting a survey to find out why last year. I shouldn't be surprised if this is delayed by Covid. There are, however, several theories. One is that sung Evensong is very beautiful and you can enjoy it as you would a concert even if you don't believe in God. We Christians might hope that a person attending Evensong or listening on the radio in that spirit would experience something of the beauty of holiness and possibly gain a sense of Who God is and how we can come to Him through Jesus Christ in faith.

Another possibility is that, whereas Holy Communion places high demands on worshippers – both to repent of every sin and to commit wholly to serving God for ever after, you can come to Evensong (or Mattins) without such a deep commitment. It is good that seekers can come to a service and learn something about Jesus before they absolutely give their lives to Him, but that's only a start. Jesus does demand that we offer our whole lives to Him. That is quite as clear in the words we use at Morning and Evening Prayer as it is in Holy Communion.

It is possible that, as with the growth in number at cathedral services in general, people are looking for a place to worship without being asked to serve on such bodies as PCCs or to be drawn into the active social life of a thriving parish. There are people don't get on with the informal services aimed at children which are the norm in some growing parishes and who are looking for a fairly traditional service with an adult sermon.

But *Lighten our darkness* is much loved apart from the context of Choral Evensong. I believe it was said at the end of every day at one of the schools my mother attended. A friend of mine - whose religious beliefs I can't say I know - recently told me how much he loved this prayer. And a writer in a journal I was reading

(admittedly that of the Prayer Book Society) was a bit surprised that his junior school age son liked this prayer (and preferred the traditional version to the rather anodyne translation of it in Common Worship).

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord. Human beings tend to be a bit afraid of the dark. What are you afraid of in the dark? Is it monsters under the bed? Is it getting lost? Is it tripping over things? Is it being attacked? The title of this prayer in the Prayer Book is *The Third Collect, for Aid against all Perils*.

Aid against all perils. What perils are we facing today? What's on your mind? What are you worried about?

There is more to light, however, than dispelling fear and gloom. You need enough light to read or to do your work. Sailors traditionally took direction from the sun, the moon and the stars. Light to guide us. The sun marks the passing of hours and days and years. The phases of the moon change over the lunar month. Light to measure time. Sunlight makes possible photosynthesis, the process whereby green plants capture energy, which enables them to grow and to reproduce. Animals and human beings feeding on plants ultimately derive their energy from sunlight.

You could say that the Big Bang, which began the universe, was an explosion of light which eventually distilled into matter in accordance with Einstein's equations. Or you could say, *God said, let there be light, and there was light.* Both statements represent an attempt to put into human language the phenomenal wonder of creation.

Jesus is the Light of the world. God the Father brings light out of darkness. *Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost.* The Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit, the (another) Paraclete is represented as seven lamps of fire burning before the throne of God (Revelation 4). Jesus is the Light of the World. His Spirit is the Light of the World. We celebrate today the coming of the Holy Spirit, our aid against all perils. The Holy Spirit working in us makes us too lights of the world, He in us, we in Him.

He is our defence. He shows us the way. He prevents us from stumbling. He keeps us safe. We can cast all our cares on God Who cares for us. The Spirit inspires our prayers and prays with us and for us. God gives us His Spirit in answer to our prayers, the very prayers the Spirit enables us to offer. The Spirit brings us to repentance so that we can be forgiven for our sins. He enables us to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth and to our neighbours. It is through the Holy Spirit that we can face whatever challenges life presents us with and do the things that God wants us to do. The Holy Spirit gives us the skills, the talents, the resources and the opportunities we need to do our work on earth. He leads us through this world of time and space on our journey to the eternal city of light. He is the Spirit of unity and fellowship and cooperation as in the Numbers reading, when God inspires the elders of Israel with His Spirit so that they can support Moses and, together with Moses, care for the Children of Israel in the desert. He is the Creator Spirit Who worked with the Father and the Son to form everything there is in Heaven and earth. Together with God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, He sustains the Universe. He is worshipped in all eternity as one person of the Holy Trinity. He labours with the Father and the Son for the creation of new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord; who hath made heaven and earth. So, don't be afraid of the dark. The Holy Spirit is the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to be with us, even to the end of the world.

COME, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,
And lighten with celestial fire.
 Thou the anointing Spirit art,
Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.
 Thy blessed unction from above,
Is comfort, life, and fire of love.
 Enable with perpetual light
The dulness of our blinded sight.
 Anoint and cheer our soiled face

With the abundance of thy grace.
 Keep far our foes, give peace at home;
Where thou art guide, no ill can come.
 Teach us to know the Father, Son,
And thee, of both, to be but One;
 That, through the ages all along,
This may be our endless song:
 Praise to thy eternal merit,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit