

The imagery of the Acts of the Apostles is very dramatic; and the arrival of the Holy Spirit it depicts is absolutely extraordinary; it forms only one of the frequent manifestations of power which stud the whole of Luke's book about the early Church. We live in a very different environment, where the marvellous and the miraculous are relegated to the outer Hebrides of human experience, and we inhabit a rationalised space where wonders do not happen. Sherlock Holmes famously spelt out the uncanny method of his detective skill, at which Dr Watson replied, "Now you've explained it, Holmes, it all seems absurdly simple."

I suspect that the presence of the miraculous in the earliest Church was exactly in line with the need for renewal and change which dwarf anything in subsequent centuries. The symbolic dreams, the sudden swerves of belief and of policy which characterise the earliest Church demanded the authority of supernatural signs.

One of the problems we experience because of this rationality of ours is precisely the urge to get the Holy Spirit sorted. We want to know exactly the meaning of the terms and the operations we're talking about. Again and again we find we are abandoning the explanations and going back to the drawing-board. John's Gospel tells us the Spirit could not come until after the Cross. Luke's Gospel tells us the Spirit led Simeon to the Temple. Genesis tells us that the Spirit of God breathed on the waters at the beginning of Creation. If our thinking about the Trinity is at all correct, we can't imagine anything *done by God* that is not done by the Spirit. The Trinity acts together. What is the relationship between the life of Jesus and the Spirit? The Spirit throws him into the desert to be tempted before his ministry begins; we know the Spirit is at work in him from the start.

It's all very untidy to our way of thinking. In John Jesus speaks of the Spirit as a wind: You hear its sound, feel its force, but where it comes from and where it is going no-one knows. That is how it is with those who are born of the Spirit. Yet the experience of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost is simple and supremely sufficient: it is a mighty wind blowing in one direction, which impels people to respond powerfully and with singleness of heart.

What is clear to me is that we talk about the Holy Spirit whenever we are thinking of the freedom of God - especially his freedom to be greater than our idea of him. We sense the Spirit when our hearts change, when our thinking expands, when we are given sudden insight and new direction. The Spirit is there whenever our hearts lift, our eyes go up, and we look out with a new awareness, and new and greater priorities. This sense goes all the way to the highest experiences we can have: the onset of love, the leading of inspiration, the redemption of the world.

The change is very clear to me: the world is lost and needs to be found, and so do I. The world is ignorant and blind, and needs learning and light, and so do I. The world is dying, and needs to be reborn, and so do I. These realisations are capable of inducing despair: the world is lost, ignorant, dark and dying. The Holy Spirit does not contradict them, but shows us the way to accept them, and still have faith, hope, and love. Because we don't know how this can be, we have no clear picture or way of talking about the Holy Spirit. But one thing we have learned: that when we are at the end of our powers, that is where the power of God takes us in hand. I have a clear sense today that the world is on the brink of reaching the end of its course, as our technology threatens to destroy our life-systems, and our political motives seem to be dead in the water. Our people drift and die. The Church is sharing in this experience, and needs the Spirit as clearly as the world it is trying to serve. This feast, therefore, is the one we most need to celebrate properly, opening our horizons as wide as the mind of God which is the Holy Spirit, and praying honestly: *Send forth your Spirit, and create us all afresh.*