

When the Spirit of God is active then things happen. You know that, because people make them happen, and it is always in the name of God and for the sake of God and his people. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost shows us this, in that the power of God comes upon the close circle of Jesus' disciples, they are inspired to witness to God in ways that people can understand and Peter preaches the first sermon of the early church in the streets of Jerusalem. The sermon, we learn later in the chapter, cuts the people who hear it "to the heart". In other words, it has a big effect and we see that effect as the Bible tells us that "about 3000 persons were added" to the fellowship of the Apostles through being baptised. It is intriguing because we don't find out how the baptism took place, or where, but the newly baptised become part of the worshipping and active early church. The Holy Spirit leads people to form the beginnings of the church which was to spread the teachings and the good news of Jesus across the world.

Tuesday this week was the day when the church remembered St Augustine of Canterbury. His mission to this country began in the year 597 A.D. and the Church of England can trace its beginnings back to that event. Augustine landed on the Isle of Thanet and then made his way to Canterbury, the home of King Aethelbert and his Christian wife from the Frankish kingdom called Bertha. It was from here that the Holy Spirit would make Augustine's work visible as he set about converting the people to Christianity.

The Romans had left a Christian country in 410 A.D. as their legions returned home from Britannia, as it was called then, to defend Rome. Over the next hundred years new peoples who worshipped strange ancient gods moved into the country from Northern Europe and the Christian population was either displaced, or absorbed into these new cultures. Christians were pushed back to the edges of the country, or at least Christianity was. During the 5th century, after the departure of the Romans, Christian missionaries travelled from Wales to Ireland, until St Patrick famously completed that work of making Ireland Christian. In the early 6th century missionaries went from Ireland, including St Columba, to the Island of Iona, off Western Scotland, and built a monastery that was used as a base to begin converting the Scots and the Picts. It was at about this time that Augustine was sent by the Pope and arrived in Kent.

The Holy Spirit was active in the original conversion of the Romans, then this country being converted to Christianity; and it continued as was seen by the spread of the gospel of Jesus into Ireland and then into Scotland. Augustine showed the Holy Spirit arriving in the South of England, for a second time, and beginning the work of converting the new, non-Christian, peoples moving from Northern Europe to live in England. The effect of the Holy Spirit was seen in the conversion of the Irish to Christianity, the conversion of many Scottish and Pictish tribes and on Christmas Day in 597 thousands were baptised as Christians, at a mass, by Augustine, in Kent.

This work of the Spirit continued until, by the 8th century, most of Britain had returned to the Christian faith. Great missionary saints kindled the fire of faith in Jesus Christ, in the hearts of people who had never known him and his love. These people who had come from Northern Europe worshipped elemental spirits and terrifying gods from ancient times, before there was any writing, so we have no idea about them apart from fragments of idols that remain and evidence of the sacrifices they seem to have demanded. This was dangerous work for the missionaries, who often faced great obstacles and discouragement. It was the Holy Spirit burning within their hearts that gave them the faith, strength and the courage to persevere.

Where is the Holy Spirit at work in our country and community today? The Spirit has not gone away. Although, it seems that Christianity has, once more, been pushed to the margins of our culture and that people have adopted different kinds of gods, again? In many ways we have adopted ourselves as gods and see our desires and wants as being above all other things? The negative effects of our desires upon other people or things seems to be something our culture largely ignores now? We have no responsibility but to ourselves, apparently? For the churches, perhaps it feels like we are similar to the early Christian saints like Augustine? Facing an indifferent or hostile culture that is sceptical of the truth that we preach?

Something the gods of individuality, greed, and callous indifference to the poor of our own time lack (and that people seem to desire and value more and more) is a sense of belonging to something that values them, cares for them and will respond to their needs? The God whom Jesus proclaims as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a God of loving care and responsiveness. This is something Jesus witnesses to at every point of his ministry, in the miracles but also in his exhortation to community kindness and support of each other. People will know the love of God, not least, through experiencing the love that other people can show to them; for that is the work of the Holy Spirit being demonstrated in a practical and real way. This is the Spirit of God making things happen, I believe.

There may not have been mass baptisms and people clamouring to be led in worship, but what has made people feel warmth of affection and hope during this terrible plague that we have been experiencing over the last few months, in this country, has been our NHS. Many of the staff are poorly paid, including frontline carers and nurses to whom our Prime Minister was so very grateful for saving his life. Yet the NHS staff have risked their lives for people. Appreciation has been publicly demonstrated in the streets each Thursday evening. For me, it is to do with the work of the Holy Spirit, leading people to give of their best, despite the cost, out of love for their fellow human beings. Things have happened and the effect of this self-sacrifice has been an inspiration to many others in our country. Perhaps there is the perception, for at least some, that a God of love cares for them and wants them to care for others? Perhaps that was what drew so many to St Augustine and the other early Saints; the Power of the Holy Spirit?