

What to say about the Queen and the Holy Spirit in one Pentecost sermon?

Throughout the entirety of her reign, churches, chapels, and cathedrals across this island and around the Commonwealth have prayed these words: *O Lord our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes, who dost from thy throne behold our most gracious Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth; and so replenish her with the grace of thy Holy Spirit, that she may always incline to thy will, and walk in thy way.* To be personally prayed for by thousands all over the world for a daily replenishing of the Holy Spirit, *every day* for 70 years. What a gift. And, regardless of our individual views on the monarchy, who can deny that Her Majesty's reign has been one of duty, constancy, and fealty to God, inspired by her strong faith and strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Pentecostal Christianity began in Kansas on the 1 January 1901. In the first hours of the 20th century, American preacher and evangelist, Charles Fox Parham, and his students at Bethel Bible School were reflecting on the Pentecost Acts passage and prayed for the gift of tongues. The story goes that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and all began speaking in different languages (that none of them had learned before) for the next several days. Thus began a movement that has continued and spread from the US across the entire globe, particularly in East Asia and West Africa.

Pentecostal Christianity is rooted in the experiences of supernatural spiritual gifts, namely tongues, prophetic words, visions and dreams, healings, among other miraculous signs and abilities. This spirituality has found a footing in a number of other established denominations under the label: *charismatic*. There are charismatic Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists – and yes – even charismatic Catholics. Now, I’m not particularly interested in exploring the authenticity of this supernatural spirituality (which *many* Christians *are* sceptical about); but rather, whether or not one has to engage with these experiences in order to be properly filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Queen... (you can probably guess where I’m going with this). I mean, I can’t know for certain, but I’m 99% sure the Queen hasn’t spoken in tongues or taken seriously, any form of charismatic spirituality and worship. And yet people all over the world have nonetheless prayed every day over the last 70 years for her to be replenished with the grace of the Holy Spirit. So, would a Christian who insists that one has to have dramatic experiences of the Spirit, like the Apostles at Pentecost and believers in Paul’s letters, in order to know the grace of the Holy Spirit, say that all those prayers simply haven’t worked?

[*pause...*]

...replenish her with the grace of thy Holy Spirit, that she may always incline to thy will and walk in thy way. I think the key word here is grace. *Charismatic* comes from the Greek *charism*, meaning grace; originally, a person with charisma or gifted with a charism, meant being filled with divine grace somehow. And a charism is a spiritual gift from the Spirit of God. Perhaps the Queen may not ever have spoken in tongues, performed a miracle, or had a prophetic vision – but she is nonetheless a charismatic person (in both the spiritual sense, and of course, in that she has a magnetic personality).

Every year, during her Christmas broadcasts, the Queen openly, unabashedly proclaims her faith in Christ, and how he has been the guiding light and the firm foundation of her entire life. Although she has reigned over hundreds of millions of citizens in the UK and around the Commonwealth, she does not forget which Lord and Sovereign *she* is ultimately answerable to, and at who's feet she will one day cast her crown. Each Christmas, someone always makes a comparison between the Queen's speech and the one ++Justin Welby gives, inevitably saying how hers is always infinitely more captivating and inspired. This is a charism. The gift of evangelism, our nation's chief evangelist, a gift from the Holy Spirit.

On Friday, at the thanksgiving service in St Paul's Cathedral, the Queen was thanked for *staying the course*. An ancient Christian virtue: as St Paul himself

says, *I have fought the good fight, I have stayed the course, I have kept the faith*. Over the course of what cannot have been an easy life, the Queen has remained an unwavering pillar of duty, constancy, and steadfastness – always attributing this to the grace drawn from her faith. This is another charism: steadfastness and endurance. A gift from the Holy Spirit.

As a traditional Broadchurch 1662 Prayerbook Anglican, it is doubtful (as I have already said) if charismatic supernatural experiences have played much, if any, part of the Queen's Christian journey. But it is profoundly misguided to therefore assume that there is some kind of deficiency of the Holy Spirit in her spiritual life.

The Christian life is about *experience*, not experiences. It is about cultivating the experience of God until it becomes a quiet, constant, steady state of the soul – *not* irregular emotional highs every Sunday (interrupted by weekdays of spiritual listlessness and apathy). On a personal note, this is why I'm far more drawn to the contemplative tradition rather than the charismatic one. I am not being silly when I say that the kind of faith the Queen has is the kind of faith I aspire to. With an abiding experience of God, not intermittent and fleeting emotional experiences.

It is that kind of Spirit-guided life which can stoically accept that *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. The kind of faith which understands that *in God we live and move and have our being*, irrespective of what powerful experiences we have or haven't had... what we feel or don't feel at any given moment. Remember, faith has little to do with feelings, and how we feel isn't necessarily a reliable indicator of anything, spiritual or otherwise.

I came across a brilliant quote this week from the Spanish theologian Juan Mascaró, which I'd like to share with you. He says that:

Those who rely on physical miracles to prove the truth of spiritual things forget the ever-present miracle of the universe and of our own lives. The lover of the physical miracle is in fact a materialist: instead of making material things spiritual, as the poet or genuinely spiritual person does, they simply make spiritual things material, and this is the source of all idolatry and superstition.

There is, sadly, much idolatry and superstition within all the major religions of the world, where faith becomes fanaticism. I highly doubt, however, that this can be said of the disciplined, resilient, temperate, and (let's be honest) quintessentially English faith of Her Majesty the Queen.

I do want to clarify that I have no issue with Christians for whom charismatic or Pentecostal spirituality is the bedrock of their own faith. Nor am I denying the authenticity of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. I am only wanting to make absolutely clear today, Pentecost Sunday, that receiving the Holy Spirit is not fundamentally about miraculous experiences. Each moment of your life is a God-given miracle; and your *experience* of the Spirit of God is eternal.

I have the utmost admiration for lifelong Christians who have never once had supernatural charismatic experiences of any sort, and yet remain steadfastly committed to their faith in God and love of Christ. Such believers are without question filled with the Holy Spirit, drawing from the wells of his grace each day, growing stronger and stronger in faith, hope, and love. So, today, as we pray for a renewing of the Spirit in our lives, and thanksgiving for Pentecost – let us continue praying for our Queen of seven decades:

O Lord our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes, who dost from thy throne behold our most gracious Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth; and so replenish her with the grace of thy Holy Spirit, that she may always incline to thy will, and walk in thy way. Amen.