

Bishop Martin's sermon for the Pentecost service in Chichester Cathedral on June 5th 2022

The leadership at Mercedes-Benz is rather grumpy at the moment because they are being rated on the stock market even lower than tobacco companies. But what has that got to do with Pentecost and the work of the Holy Spirit?

Well, a couple of weeks ago Mercedes Benz launched their new policy of moving up-market with the picture of a 6000 year old jade axe in the British Museum, suggesting this was evidence that luxury has a very long history.

The axe is an 8 inch, tear-shaped piece of jade which is highly polished and very sharp. It was found, surprisingly, in Canterbury. In his book, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, Neil MacGregor notes how the axe has not a single sign of wear and tear, because "it was never intended to be used, but rather to be admired".

He notes that the jade was quarried from a mountain range, somewhere around 2000 metres above sea level, high up through the clouds, "midway between our world on earth and the celestial realm...this jade was treated with extreme care and reverence."

Mercedes-Benz had made a category mistake. The axe is about reverence: luxury is the misrepresentation of that.

In the classical world from which we derive our language, luxury is an excess that is disordered, out of control, beyond reason. I am not saying that the Mercedes-Benz company is like that. But it has failed to understand that as an object of reverence the Canterbury Axe connected anyone who saw or touched it with the mystery of creation. And by inspiring reverence for the natural world it points us to the mystery of Pentecost (with the elements of wind and fire) and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We shall shortly stand to say the Nicene Creed in which we assert that we believe in the Holy Spirit who has spoken through the prophets. What will you mean by that statement?

At a very basic level we might mean that the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, like Samuel and Elijah, and those with books named after them, like Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Daniel, were inspired by the Holy Spirit. So we are saying that the work of the Holy Spirit does not begin on the day of Pentecost but that Pentecost is the culmination of a process in which the activity

of God the Holy Spirit has been slowly revealed in many different ways that are in some sense prophetic because they point us to Jesus, who shows us the likeness of God the Father.

But I have always loved the confident claim of early Christian writers that the Holy Spirit leads us to faith in Jesus Christ in many ways. Somewhere around 200 AD, Clement of Alexandria writes about ancient, non-Biblical thought (the work of Aristotle and Plato, for example) as “a kind of preparatory discipline” for those who come to faith in God through the Bible and the Church.

The recognition of the Holy Spirit as the inspiration of many things that lead us to God is why in the sacred art of Michelangelo’s frescos in the Sistine Chapel, and in the mosaics of St Paul’s cathedral in London, you will find a depiction of the Sybil of Delphi – an ostensibly pagan figure or prophetess who is venerated simply for communicating the unseen reality of the divine life.

And the Canterbury Axe is also an expression of that conviction. It survives from an early stage of human history when we were still finding our way towards knowledge of God. The axe exists as a statement of inspiration that directs us beyond itself towards something we cannot fully describe.

So on this festival of Pentecost let us give thanks for the elements of creation that the Holy Spirit uses to inspire our worship of God. Let us give thanks for art that inspires us to worship the God of justice and of hope.

This year, the Venice Biennale welcomed President Volodymyr Zelensky to that international arts festival, to introduce the Ukrainian Pavilion which featured an installation by Pavlo Markov, entitled *The Fountain of Exhaustion*.

It is a massive triangular structure of metal funnels through which water drips and trickles as it runs away to waste. This is the artist’s meditation on the exhaustion of humanity and of democracy. It stands as a challenge to greed and conflict funded by billionaires whose moral lives bear the hallmarks of luxury that is profoundly disordered in the way it can drain the life and hope out of countless people.

This symbol of running water will also evoke the virtues of faith and hope which the Holy Spirit nurtures in us through baptism. These are signs of the kingdom of God, in which we renounce evil and seek the reordering of luxury, with its destructive powers, into a world

order that honours the dignity of every human person and the intrinsic relationship between justice, truth and the worship of God.

Let us give thanks for sacred space in our churches and cathedrals and its ability to inspire a vision of beauty, creation and society renewed.

When I was on the staff of St Paul's cathedral someone wrote to advise us that we should sell the cathedral and give the money to the poor. I thought that this would probably be illegal and have limited impact on the lives of the poor.

But I also thought that the poor need more than money. They have a right to the experience of beauty, to the use of time and place where they have status by right of human dignity, are known by name and cannot be accounted for as a statistic, and where worship demonstrates its protest that every human being is equal before God and destined for glory in heaven.

The request to put up the For Sale notices outside St Paul's arose from a category error, like the Mercedes-Benz misunderstanding of the difference between luxury and devotion: it failed to understand the empowering transformation that resides in worship.

Finally, let us give thanks for our capacity for reverence and for its application to the social processes of our life.

Freely-chosen deference to one another is an expression of reverence for another human person and for God as our creator. Deference imposed as a form of denigration and slavery is a sin against the Holy Spirit's presence in every person made in God's image and redeemed by God's Son, Jesus Christ. Wilful disregard for deference dishonours creator and created alike and is equally destructive, since it corrodes our capacity for reverence, for worship, for awe and wonder, and for being humbly and overwhelmingly in love, as God is in love with you. Disregard for deference and reverence is a small-minded denial of the Spirit's gift of holy fear that trembles with delight at the presence of God.

All these things are buried deep in the meaning of the Canterbury Axe. They are some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit has spoken, and speaks still, "through the prophets" who are the people and the works that lead us to God.

So, come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, O God, and renew the face of the earth in justice, truth and beauty.