I was recently at the theatre when a leading actor forgot the lines. It was fine. The cast managed brilliantly because it was a play about forgetfulness and dementia!

Many of us know what it’s like to forget a name when we’re in the middle of a conversation and by the time we’ve remembered it, we’ve forgotten what we were going to saying anyway.

Turning to today’s gospel, St John presents us with an insight into the mind of God where all our secrets are remembered, not hidden. The insight hinges on a strange moment when Jesus breathes on the apostles who are gathered behind locked doors on that first Easter Sunday evening.

By doing this, Jesus is bringing the Church to life, awakening within the apostles the life of the Holy Spirit which he had exhaled and handed over as he gave himself up to death on the cross. Remember the carefully chosen words that St John used to describe this. In the King James Version it says, ‘He gave up the ghost’. The words ‘gave up’ translate a Greek word that also has the clear sense of handing over or entrusting something into another person’s care.

The Holy Ghost is entrusted to Mary the mother of Jesus and to St John as they stand beneath the cross. And if I can revert to my recent experience in the theatre, one of the functions of the Holy Ghost is to remind us of our lines in the role we are called to play in the divine drama of creation and redemption.

In Luke’s gospel we are told that when Mary conceived Jesus in her womb she was ‘overshadowed’ by the Holy Spirit in a material, physical way. After the birth of Jesus, Luke tells us twice that Mary ‘treasured’ that mysterious event and its outcome in her heart. You could say that this treasuring is how Mary repeated and remembered her lines, constantly going over that sense that God the Holy Spirit had awakened in her of a drama in which God keeps his promises to us from one generation to another, prompting Mary to say ‘The almighty has done great things for me’.

In the hours leading up to his arrest Jesus also promised the disciples that ‘The Holy Spirit will remind you of all that I have said to you.’ The Holy Spirit is the agent who enables us to remember the teaching of Jesus and to inhabit it. And this is about more than remembering texts in the way that you might remember poetry or your lines from a show in a Chichester playhouse that ran for a limited season.

The Holy Spirit could be said to re-mind us, that is to give us new minds, awakened to the capacity for knowing the mind of Jesus Christ, and for knowing the life of God. That is the bold claim made by St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (2.16): ‘But we are those who have the mind of Christ.’

In the play where the actor forgot the lines, the others carried on because they all knew each other’s lines and were able to prompt their colleague back into the script.

I was fascinated by this as an example of how something living, like a play, can be repaired by those who have a shared dependency in its life – namely the other actors – so that the play can continue to engage its audience in communicating its message.

This seems to have a very obvious application to the life of the Church, particularly in our own time. Forgetfulness is always a possibility for those who are on stage in live theatre, just as it is for the Church which is immersed in the changing dynamics of history and culture. But the Holy Spirit is the gift that re-minds the Church of her calling and her role in the drama of salvation, sustaining us with a capacity for remembering the truth in a way that makes sense of the words spoken by other players, who have taken leading roles in the Christian drama, across time and place. They are the saints. The names of some of them are famous, like Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa of Calcutta. They are indispensable in helping us to ensure that our presentation here and now is consistent, authentic and authoritative.

When we look carefully at the text of John’s gospel, we see that the phrase I quoted a moment ago (‘The Holy Spirit will remind you of all that I have said to you’ Jn 14.26) has a complex history. Just one word will indicate how interesting this might be: it is the word that we translate as ‘remind’. There’s lots to say about the Greek version and I’m not going to tell you what it is! But I do want to tell you about the Latin version – reminding ourselves that for more than a thousand years this was the version used by all Christians in the West, so we ought not to forget its importance.

The Latin word used for ‘remind’ in John 14.26 is *suggero*, the word from which we get the English verb, ‘to suggest’, and the adjective, ‘suggestive’. It’s a word that is only used in the New Testament of the Latin Bible, indicating the need for a new word to convey how the Holy Spirit will unite us with Jesus.

Suggestive words and phrases are often associated with ribaldry – the kind of humour that sold risqué postcards in seaside towns all along the Sussex coast. They caused amusement and outrage, but the key thing is that they worked at a profoundly human level of instinct. The Latin word, *suggero*, is telling us that the Holy Spirit works within us in that way. The prompting, awakening, and re-minding of the Holy Spirit is instinctive, while at the same time it can demand the disciplined application of mind and heart in response. It engages every human person in a way that is natural and intrinsic, inviting us to suggest a response that makes sense of the mystery of God in the drama of love and salvation by stirring the imagination in ways that enrich and astonish us as they take us by surprise.

So, for example, the suggestive prompting of the Holy Spirit enables the 15th century Fra Angelico to paint the 13th St Dominic as a serene witness to the Transfiguration, when the apostles Peter, James and John are smitten by awe and amazement, while the 20th century Max Ernst can show the Virgin Mary smacking Christ child, a provocative statement about the incarnation and suffering. The 19th century composer, Mascagni, can conspire to give one of his best opera tunes to Santuzza, a woman misled and betrayed by her lover, and the person who leads the famous Easter Hymn to Mary, the immaculate Virgin Mother of God, in a woman-to-woman affirmation of faith and hope against all odds. Poets and playwrights are similarly inspired by the suggestive work of the Holy Spirit to create and fuse words, so that the ordinary, pedestrian meaning of a word turns somersaults in our minds, as when Shakespeare invents “the multitudinous seas incardanine, making the green one red” bringing Macbeth to judgement for his crimes, or when Gerard Manley Hopkins wrestles sounds out of words to describe the beauty of creation, ‘wherever an elm arches/Shivelights and shadowtackle in long lashes lace, lance and pair’.

Over and above this, the Holy Spirit also suggests simple words of prayer that take us into the compassionate heart of God, seen in the face of Jesus the Good Shepherd. We used to see these words in the prayer requests left at the Shrine of St Richard, which would say things like, ‘God bless Beth, my niece, having a hard time’, or we hear them in prayers and hymns that give shape to our worship, ‘Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee O Lord…’ and which articulate our hope that ‘with the morn those angel faces smile, which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.’

These are just some examples of how the Holy Spirit re-minds us, enabling us to achieve our greatest dignity in this one thing: ‘that we may perfectly love God and worthily magnify his holy Name’. So, come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love.