

The Icon of Pentecost

For Contemplation

I gaze with faith at the Icon and allow the Truths hidden and revealed there to speak to my heart. I respond to God gently and gradually until I am drawn into a deep contemplative silence.

Some Scripture

1 Cor 12:4-30 The variety and unity of gifts of the Spirit, and the analogy of the body.

Rom 12:4-9 Parts of one body, and gifts of the Spirit

Acts 2:1-13 Pentecost

Acts 2:42-47 The early Christian Community

Acts 4:32-35 The early Christian Community



Icons are living realities; they are not objects. And being living realities they have something to say to the Spirit living within us. They are a way of releasing the Spirit inside us, leading us to pray.

We must learn to pray like the mountain: be still. We must learn to pray like the sunflower: be constantly turned towards God. And we must learn to pray like the ocean: to be carried along by our rhythmical breathing, into a deep calm.

The Icons we've prayed with so far have centred around the mystery of the Incarnation. These next ones focus on the mystery of the Trinity. In the Eastern Church the day of Pentecost is actually the Feast of the Trinity. On the feast of Pentecost it is actually the Icon of the Trinity, not Pentecost, that is venerated.

This Icon has us guessing at first. We recognise the dark cave, and the rays of fire coming from the top of the Icon. Yet, although the Acts of the Apostles says that the coming of the Spirit was accompanied by noise and perturbation, this Icon reflects quite the opposite: harmony and deep tranquillity.

With the Ascension the work of Christ is now completed, the Church is constituted. It is a communion of mind and heart; a communion of differing gifts and ministries, and a communion which must transmit the message of Jesus in words and tongues that can be understood by everyone. So with Pentecost the believer is invited to contemplate and experience the inner life of the Church. And the inner life of the Church is profound unity and yet a wonderful diversity, all of which comes through the action of the Spirit.

The background to this Icon is not a room with doors locked: it is a Church. Pentecost is the feast of the birthday of the Church. The gift of the Spirit is not a gift for individuals only, but for the community of believers. We individuals receive the Spirit in the Church and through the Church.

The Apostles are inside the Church, and are themselves temples for the Holy Spirit.

We see twelve figures seated with Mary. St Paul is depicted sitting opposite Peter; and the four Gospel writers [books in hand] are there, while the others hold scrolls of the scriptures. The Spirit is given to the whole Church, and to all in it. The apostles are depicted as being disciples – listening – as well as being teachers – sitting in a teaching position.

The focal point of the Icon is the top, where the fire and tongues of flame are represented. The apostles' attention is towards that manifestation of God's power.

The postures of the apostles indicate their unity in diversity. There is one truth, but many different ways of expressing that truth. No movement in one figure is repeated in another. The Icon also emphasises the sense of order and stability by the reverse perspective in the figures: which grow bigger as they recede from the foreground.

The little man dressed as a king is usually known as Cosmos. He represents the world, waiting for the Spirit. He is a prisoner of ignorance and darkness, representing the world without faith. He is old and bowed down, made so by the sin of Adam. His royal crown signifies sin, which has ruled the world, and the white cloth on which the twelve scrolls are resting represent the teachings of the apostles after Pentecost. His hands indicate an attitude of welcome, holding out a gift for the whole world.

Mary is present, submerged as a simple believe among the disciples. The Church's understand of Mary's mothering of Jesus is made complete in her mothering of the Church. She is present in the praying and interceding position, in the centre as a still point of contemplation, while the apostles display the movement and energy of mission. Action and contemplation.

God casts fire on the earth, and sends the Church, built on the Apostles, out on mission to the ends of the world.

Conversion, thanksgiving, praise for salvation received in Jesus Christ, evangelising mission, and life in a communion of love – that's Pentecost.

This Icon is about the unity of the Church which we belong to: the new humanity that our divided and wounded world is so anxiously looking for.