

Today we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and the birth of the Church. Each one present heard the Apostles speaking to them in their own native language; speaking in foreign tongues is called *glossolalia* and – in this instance – it served a practical purpose.

The Holy Spirit – God at work in the world – floods the world with its graces, pouring them out profligately upon nature and upon us. It's unlimited self-giving. No one is left out of this, no one is given nothing – even the most unlikeliest of us – and no one is forgotten.

The 19th century Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed this outpouring with an image of the Holy Spirit 'brooding' over the world in his poem *God's Grandeur*. The second stanza goes like this:

“And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
wings.”

‘Brooding’ and ‘warm breast’ have feminine associations and this is a very feminine thing, this effusive outpouring – but ‘feminine’ here has nothing to do with gender or sexuality. It’s about birthing, enabling, creating, lavishing graces. It’s a quality of spiritual energy. Interestingly enough, for several centuries in the Church, the Holy Spirit was regarded as feminine: in Hebrew the word for ‘spirit’ – *ruach* – is feminine. In ancient Syriac, which was in common use in the around 300AD, and was derived from the language that Jesus spoke, Aramaic, the word for ‘spirit’ is feminine. It’s also interesting that although for centuries we have been used to calling the Holy Spirit ‘he’ as the third member of the Trinity, his image from the beginning has always been a dove, which as a symbol is usually thought of as feminine. An early Church father, St Irenaeus, identified the Holy Spirit with divine Wisdom, which again, is feminine in Hebrew.

This may not be theologically significant, but psychologically and spiritually it is very important for us, because the work of the Holy Spirit is to open us up to authenticity of soul... and authenticity of soul opens us up to God. By brooding over us and holding us to its warm breast, the Holy Spirit draws us to

that place inside us where we are fully present to ourselves in God.

Authenticity of soul means:

- finding what truly drives and guides our life, what is of the utmost importance to us...
- knowing that we are not alone and can never be: in the fullness of God's being with are eternally connected to everyone and everything...
- making the effort to listen to the song that somebody else's heart sings...
- giving thanks every day for our life and our being; not for this or that but for the very fact of our existence...
- recognising all the barriers within us that we have built to keep love out....
- realising that beneath all the passing flux of our life there is an abiding stillness...
- believing that there is no such thing as death, only succeeding stages of endless life, that nothing and no one is ever lost...

- knowing that in the end, whatever suffering there may be in the world, the power that holds everything together and gives everything meaning, is love...
- and because of this, waking up to the fact that we do not have to be afraid, not at all, not now in these times, not ever, because the opposite of love is not hate but fear, and love is in charge of the universe. It may not seem like it at times, but it is the only truth: love.

All this is what authenticity of soul means. It is soul-making, if you like. It is us being in touch with our true self in God. And it is the work of the Holy Spirit, wonderfully, who will always brood over the bent world with warm breast and bright wings.