



Sermon preached by The Reverend Philippa White on 15 May 2016

I've just come back from Taizé. Some of you may have heard of it – it's the place where Taizé chants come from! It's an international and ecumenical monastic community in Burgundy, founded in the 1940s, which quickly became a place of pilgrimage for young people from across Europe. It's a place I love very much.

Taizé is international – and that means multi-lingual. Those of you who have sung Taizé chants will know that they can be in all sorts of languages – this week I've sung in Dutch, Kiswahili and Russian, as well as the more obvious French, German, Latin and English! And other things, too, are multi-lingual – during the three-times-daily prayer, the Bible is read in four or five languages; when a group meets together, the first thing that happens is that the languages spoken by the group are checked, and out of those who are part of the group, people volunteer to translate so that everyone can understand.

So Taizé, for me, is a picture of Pentecost – of Luke's image of faithful people of all nations, speaking a multitude of different languages, and yet all somehow hearing the good news of Jesus in their own native language. Taizé is the closest I've ever got to that: it's not just an image, but the actual event, of the Gospel being preached to the ends of the earth, among people of all nationalities. And by preaching, I don't just mean in words – but in the sharing together of worship, meals and community life, and in mutual care, support and love.

But Taizé is not a place that exists for its own sake. The brothers of the community – of whom there are more than a hundred, many of whom are young – focus their energies on looking outward: there are daughter communities in deprived parts of the world (Senegal, Bangladesh and Brazil, among others), where the brothers live in deprived areas and provide a pace of hospitality, support and generosity. The brothers at Taizé itself spend a lot of their time supporting the young people who visit. And those who visit know that they are probably not called to spend their life there. Taizé exists to equip and send out those whom it welcomes: it is a place to encounter one another and God, to be refreshed and renewed, to be sent out with a new energy.

And there, too, it is a picture of Pentecost – of the Holy Spirit renewing and sending out the community of the disciples, which, like Taizé, doesn't exist for its own sake. The gift of the Holy Spirit sends them out of the house where they were sitting – to be a community existing for other people and for the Gospel, a community which spreads over all the world. The rush of wind that fills the house sends them out of the house – and that rush of wind, rush of the Spirit, pushes along the whole narrative of Acts, the story of the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

The gift of the Spirit, shared as a community, puts the disciples in a new relationship with one another and with God: a relationship which impels them to share the good news. A

shared experience which revives and renews them, empowers them and sends them out. Just as I have experienced, this last week, at Taizé.

But this experience of the disciples wasn't designed as a one off. My experience at Taizé shouldn't be anything special. This should be what the church is and does – what we're for. We should be a community where the Spirit is present – in our relationships with one another as we live with and for each other; in our worship, renewing us by giving us the presence of God and firing us to be sent out in the power of that presence; in our prayer for the world and one another. And so we should also be a place where, empowered by the Spirit, we are sent out. To preach and to prophesy, heal and save – just as, impelled by the wind of the Spirit, the disciples do in Acts.

Preach; prophesy; heal; save. Those are big and frightening words. But they are not necessarily as daunting as they sound; and we are given the gift of the Spirit to make all this possible! As at Taizé, preaching can be by the way we live – visibly with and for each other, with grace, generosity, openness and hospitality. Our very existence in this new mode, empowered by the Spirit to love without limits, can be a prophecy – a truth-telling about the ways of God – in a world that is fearful and judgmental. And if we really live like that – really listening to those around us, really loving even those people the media tells us to be afraid of or disgusted by, really working to bring the love of God into focus in the communities where we live – what are we except agents of God's healing and saving love?

We are not all called to found monastic communities! Our calling might be very simple – it might be where we are, in our normal days. It might be like the calling of the only English speaker in a group from the Netherlands who, at Taizé, suddenly finds herself called upon to translate.

In fact, Brother Roger – the founder of Taizé – never thought he was called to found a community where thousands of people, week by week, would meet with God and be sent out renewed. It all just happened – when he responded in faith to the calling of the Spirit, day by day, and when other people, following that same calling, came to help him build – and God's plan for that place and those people slowly emerged.

That's the work of the Spirit. We do faithfully what we are called to do – and suddenly it all slots into place. Our calling dovetails with one another's – and suddenly something wonderful and beautiful emerges.

But God needs all of us to be faithful. God needs us to pray that we would know the will of God, and that the Spirit would empower us to carry it out. God will not force us to be filled with the Spirit – we are free to dismiss God's calling as idealistic and unrealistic. We are free to turn our backs on God's plans.

But if we do, can we really call ourselves the Church?

God will not force us – but God will empower us.

So can we pray that we would be willing to turn to God and hear the calling which is ours alone?

Can we pray for the Holy Spirit to give us the courage and compassion to carry it out?

Can we pray together now, and every day:

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, ignite in us your holy fire.

Give us the grace to turn to you, to hear our calling and to do your will.
Revive your Church with the breath of love,
that we may be part of your love for the whole world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.