



Parish of Finchampstead and California

HYMNS FOR PENTECOST

31 MAY 2020

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to Good Friday and Easter Day, there are very few well-known hymns that celebrate the day of Pentecost itself. Most of the hymns sung on the day are hymns to the Holy Spirit, the main thrust of which is to ask for ourselves an experience similar to that of the disciples when they were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. I've chosen three - two translations of ancient hymns and one modern one.

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire

1 Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,
and lighten with celestial fire;
thou the anointing Spirit art,
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart:

2 Thy blessèd unction from above
is comfort, life, and fire of love;
enable with perpetual light
the dullness of our blinded sight:

3 Anoint and cheer our soiled face
with the abundance of thy grace:
keep far our foes, give peace at home;
where thou art guide no ill can come.

4 Teach us to know the Father, Son,
and thee, of both, to be but One;
that through the ages all along
this may be our endless song,

5 Praise to thy eternal merit,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Authorship and translation

Traditionally the original latin poem (*Veni, Creator spiritus*) on which this hymn is based is attributed to Rabanus Maurus Magentius (c780 – 856). He was a Frankish Benedictine monk, theologian, poet, and writer who became archbishop of Mainz. One of the most prominent teachers and writers of his age, he was known as *Praeceptor Germaniae* (*teacher of Germany*).

Part of the poem was paraphrased and translated into English by John Cosin (1594 - 1672). Replacing a longer translation attributed to Cranmer in the 1550 Ordinal, his version was incorporated in the Ordination services in the revisions made for the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, with which he was heavily involved. By then Cosin had demonstrated his loyalty to the Stuart monarchy: he wrote his *Collection of Private Devotions* (1627), in which this hymn first appeared, for use by Charles I's court. He spent the Commonwealth period in exile and, on the Restoration of Charles II, he was made Bishop of Durham.

Content of the hymn

The twofold aim of the hymn is to praise the Holy Spirit and to call down on us the attributes which characterised the first Pentecost. Note particularly the use throughout of simple imperatives: *come, enable, anoint and cheer, keep far our foes, give peace, teach*. Note also the emphasis on the *anointing* role of the Holy Spirit (v1 line 3; v2 line 1 - *unction* - see below; v3 line 1) which is uncommon usage in the NT, though it is implied via references to Jesus as *Messiah = Christ = Anointed One*. In most hymn books Cosin's words are used without amendment*, in spite of the archaism of some of the language. Sometimes verse 3 is omitted.

Verse 1: *Holy Ghost* (as used throughout the BCP) = *Holy Spirit*: *ghost* and *spirit* were interchangeable in the 16th and 17th centuries. *Lighten* = *ignite, set light to*. This verse is clearly derived from the description of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as *divided tongues, as of fire* (Acts 2:3). Each disciple was 'anointed' when *a tongue rested on each of them and they were filled with the Holy Spirit*. The *sevenfold gifts* of the Spirit are those listed in Romans 12:6-8 - prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, compassion.

Verse 2: *Unction* = *anointing* but has extra overtones of *extreme unction*, the anointing of the sick in preparation for death; this was one of the five Roman Catholic sacraments not accepted as such by the Church of England at the Reformation. *Comfort* comes from Jesus' description of the Holy Spirit as *the Comforter* in John 14-16. The Spirit as life-giver appears frequently in Paul's letters - see particularly Romans 8. *Perpetual light* is the petition for the dead at the start of the RC Requiem Mass. Here it implies the utter contrast once the Spirit has come to a believer with their (our) previous blindness. A further implication of *perpetual* is that, once received, the Spirit's effects cannot be withdrawn.

Verse 3: *Soiled face* is a poetic depiction of the grubbiness we acquire by our sin, all of which is wiped away by the grace of God (note the use also of *abundant*, the word Jesus used of the life he came to bring - John 10:10), announced again by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. After such compassion comes confidence in the Spirit's continuing presence as *guide* in our lives.

Verses 4&5: Starts with a succinct statement of Trinitarian understanding leading to the final chorus of praise.

* But not Hymns Old and New which offers minor but unnecessary changes to verse 4.

Come down, O love divine

1 Come down, O love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing.
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.

2 O let it freely burn,
Till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let Thy glorious light
Shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

3 Let holy charity
Mine outward vesture be,
And lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart,
Which takes the humbler part,
And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

4 And so the yearning strong,
With which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace,
Till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

Authorship and translation

The original Italian poem from which this hymn is derived (*Discendi, amor santo*) was written by Bianco da Siena (c1350 - 1434) as one of some 100 *Laudi Spirituali*. He was a member of the lay order of Jesuates which came to be known for its mystical fervour and was eventually suppressed. The *Laudi* were not published until 1851. They came to the attention of Richard Littledale (1833 - 1890), an Irish Anglican high church priest and author, at a time when many similar-minded people, including John Mason Neale with whom Littledale collaborated on a *Commentry on the Psalms*, were looking to the medieval and earlier church for texts to convert into hymns. *Come down O love divine* was based on part of Bianco's original and published in *The People's Hymnal* in 1867.

Content of the hymn

This hymn is a more personal response to the Holy Spirit than *Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire* (CHG), and the original version has also survived pretty much intact in later hymnbooks. It lacks the earlier hymn's emphasis on anointing and its Trinitarian conclusion, but it shares certain other elements as noted below.

Verse 1 has an unusual structure copying the doublet approach of much Hebrew poetry (as in the Psalms) where the second half repeats the sense of the first half in slightly different words: *Come down / draw near; love divine / Comforter; soul of mine / my heart; visit with ardour / kindle with holy flame*. This opening is similar to the first two lines of CHG but here continues into verse 2 where the freshly kindled fire of the Holy Spirit overwhelms and destroys (inferior if not positively bad) *earthly passions*. Lines 4 and 5 have a similar thrust to the final two lines of CHG verse 2 - *glorious / perpetual light transforming my/our sight* - but moves in a different direction with the idea of our being *clothed in light*.

Verse 3 develops this idea, looking at the ways in which being clothed in the light of the Holy Spirit will affect us. There are two ways - first we take on the outer clothing, the way we are seen by others, of *holy charity* (= *love divine*), in other words we take on the supreme, defining characteristic of God. But at the same time we are transformed inwardly too, becoming aware of our *shortcomings* and of our need for forgiveness. In the light of the Holy Spirit we see ourselves in the way God sees us, and we replace pride and self-satisfaction with humility. Metaphorically at least, we weep.

This emotional intensity continues in verse 4, the precise meaning of which is hard to unpick. The link words *And so* suggest a connection with what has preceded them: the tears of (self-) *loathing* engender a *yearning* of indescribable intensity. This can be satisfied only by a recognition deep in our innermost *soul* of the *grace* (see also CHG verse 3 line 2) it will receive once it is home to the Holy Spirit (*become* here means *turn into* not *reach*). This thought returns us to the start of the hymn and its desire for *Love divine* to seek out *this soul of mine*.

But whereas verse 1 refers to the start of the process (the *visit* and the *bestowing* of the *holy flame*), the remainder of the hymn, culminating in verse 4, anticipates that understanding and coming to terms with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will necessarily take time, perhaps a long time. So it was for the first disciples - the day of Pentecost marked a dramatic change, but the working out of what it meant for the newborn church was subject to constant recalibration and refreshment, as the rest of the Acts of the Apostles and subsequent history reminds us.

The Spirit lives to set us free (Walk in the light)

1 The Spirit lives to set us free,
walk, walk in the light.
He binds us all in unity,
walk, walk in the light.

*Walk in the light,
walk in the light,
walk in the light,
walk in the light of the Lord.*

2 Jesus promised life to all,
The dead were wakened by his call.

3 He died in pain on Calvary,
to save the lost like you and me.

4 We know his death was not the end,
He gave his Spirit to be our friend.

5 By Jesus' love our wounds are healed,
The Father's kindness is revealed.

6 The Spirit lives in you and me,
His light will shine for all to see.

Authorship

In contrast to the other two hymns this is an original composition of 1978 by Brother Damian Lundy (1944-97), a member of the Roman Catholic de la Salle order, who was heavily involved in RC education in the UK and the church's ministry to young people.

Content of the hymn

The earlier hymns are reflective, describing the effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit to an individual believer. *Walk in the light* is a song of proclamation, celebrating the Spirit against the background of the role of Jesus in salvation history. The words are simple, though entirely biblically-based, and the dynamic momentum is maintained by the repeated refrains in and after each verse.

Refrain: *Walk in the light* (John 12:35); *light of the Lord* (Ephesians 5:8)

Verse 1: *The Spirit lives to set us free* (Romans 8:2); *unity* (Romans 12:16)

Verse 2: *life to all* (John 10:10); *the dead were wakened* (eg John 11:43 - Lazarus)

Verse 3: *died in pain* (Mark 15:37); *save the lost* (Luke 19:10)

Verse 4: *his death was not the end* (1 Corinthians 15:54-55); *to be our friend* (John 14:16-17)

Verse 5: *wounds are healed* (1 Peter 2:24); *the Father's kindness is revealed* (2 Corinthians 1:9-10)

Verse 6: *lives in you and me* (Romans 8:11); *light will shine* (2 Corinthians 4:6)