

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

There does at first sight appear to be some mixed messages coming through today's readings. The Old Testament reading encourages us to come drink the wine. The epistle says, don't get drunk with wine. Jesus is talking about drinking my blood, which is the wine we take at communion.

Now, I'm not going to try and unravel all that. Instead, I'm going to keep it simple and focused on just one phrase that appears in our epistle from the Book of Hebrews. And the phrase is this, "Be filled with the Spirit". And my inspiration for this sermon came from an ex-warden Julie Castan, who was kind enough to water our plants when we were away on holiday. And we got back, and Julie said, "It's actually quite difficult to water your plants."

I said, "Well, why is that?" She said, "Well, you filled them up so much with soil that whenever you water them, the water just runs straight off." And Julie is a decent gardener. So I have learned now, so every time I pot a succulent now, I don't fill the soil to the top. I leave a gap so I could water them properly. And what's true of succulents, is true for all of us. How can we be filled with the Spirit of God if we're not empty to start with?

How do we make room for God to be filled with His Spirit? And the lesson I learnt from Julie isn't new. It's the basis for the teaching of the third century Desert Mothers and Fathers. There's a famous story from that period about a young man who went out to see one of the wise old fathers in the desert. He wanted to talk to him about prayer. He wanted to learn how to pray.

The old man said nothing when he arrived. Instead, he silently lit a fire, started to brew and made the man a cup of tea. And he was pouring the tea into his cup, and he kept pouring and he kept pouring when the cup was overflowing. And the young man stopped him and said, "Well, look, stop. The cup's full." And that's when the old man spoke. He said, "So it is with you. Until you are empty, how can you find what you seek?"

And the young man learned the lesson that he needed to learn. The old man, like all the Desert Fathers and Mothers, had gone into the desert to find space. The emptiness of the desert proved to be a good place to create space in the soul. And they were following the example of Jesus when they did this. We could see in the gospels that Jesus himself very often withdrew into the wilderness.

This is typical from the Gospel of Mark. "Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed." And there are verses like that throughout the gospels. Before and after all the major events in Jesus' life, he went off to seek silence and to pray. He withdrew from all the hustle and bustle of His daily ministry. He found time to be alone. And this was one of the secrets of Jesus' life. This was where he found the strength to do His Father's will. If we're to follow him and to walk His ways, we too need to find those times of silence to pause and withdraw. We too need to punctuate our lives.

I don't know if you've ever tried to read anything without punctuation, but it's very, very difficult. It's hard to make sense of letters if they're not arranged properly and the grammar's not right and the meaning can be different. You've probably heard of that famous book about grammar, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, a great example of how punctuation changes the meaning of something. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* could describe a panda's diet. Put some punctuation in, it could describe a cowboy's visit to a saloon.

So it is with our lives. It's the punctuation of silence and solitude and reflection, which gives meaning to our lives, which helps us to make sense of our lives, to stop it just being a constant stream of noise and activity. It's in the quiet as we turn to God, as we empty ourselves, that we give God the opportunity to fill us, to fill us with His Spirit, because too often we're full of something else. We suffer from the tyranny of distractions.

I was talking to someone this week whose mind was full of conflicting thoughts, and she told me

that she needed to sort out what she called "the debris of her mind". We've all got too much debris in our hearts and our minds. Sometimes all the junk that accumulates over the years has to be cleared out by the Holy Spirit. The Quakers talk of the work of the Holy Spirit as God's sifting silence. If we're to open ourselves up to the work of God in our lives by His Spirit, we need to sift through the debris and allow God to fill us with His joy and peace.

When I was thinking about all this, I was reminded about all the posh weddings that I've officiated at in London when I was there. And some of them were very posh. And the rule of thumb in England is that the posher the wedding, the less food there is at the reception. So, I've been to many receptions in very fancy locations and drunk magnificent champagne and been served just a few, very small, but no doubt very expensive hors d'oeuvres. And that's it. So, over the years, I got experienced at this and I knew where to position myself at the reception, by the door of the kitchen.

Because if you're at the other end of the room, the plates are empty by the time you get there because everybody's starving. So, this particular wedding, it was perfect. I was right by the kitchen door. I managed to guzzle every single plate that went past. And I don't know about you, but when I've got to double figures of fried shrimp, I feel full. And just as I was starting to feel rather bloated to the point of queasiness, the best man stood up and said, "Dinner is now served." And the staff opened these doors to a magnificent feast that was laid out on gloriously decorated tables, and it was all wasted on me. I couldn't partake. I couldn't eat another thing because I was already full. And Jesus invites everyone to a banquet.

Our communion service is a foretaste of what is to come. "Come feast with me," Jesus says. How many of us are ready for that? My fear is that too many of us can't take up that invitation because we're already full of spiritual junk food, that we've no room left for the bread of life, no room to receive God's invitation, because there's too much debris around.

When we come to receive communion, we come to the rail empty-handed. There's no other way to come. And one of the reasons I find it so humbling and such a spiritually intense moment to give communicants the host in their empty hands is because it's a sign of openness, a sign of being ready to receive God's life and fullness. We have to come empty-handed. We can't come with a wallet or a phone. We come to receive in our hands the bread of life. So, as we come forward today, I invite you to think about God's promise to fill us with His Holy Spirit.

He is the living bread. Those who share in this communion Eucharistic feast have the promise of life in all its fullness. And as we move now into a baptism service, that's our hope for Thea and for Josephine, that they too will come to know the fullness of God's life. That those who are anointed by God's Spirit today will come to find the fullness of that spiritual life.

So may the empty hands with which we come to communion be a sign of our desire to be filled with God's Spirit. If we provide the spiritual hunger, God provides the spiritual food. We feast on Jesus, the living bread, which is the food of eternity. Amen.