

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

When I first looked to the reading set for today I did notice there seemed to be a bit of a mixed message coming through. The Old Testament reading encourages us to "Come, drink the wine." The epistle says, "Don't get drunk with wine." In the gospel Jesus is talking about drinking wine which is his blood. It all seemed terribly confusing, so I'm not going to try and unravel all that. I'm going to keep it simple, and I'm gonna focus and say a few words about one phrase that we find in our epistle set today from the book of Ephesians. The phrase is this, "Be filled with the Spirit," Paul says. But, I was inspired to say a few words by Julie, our wonderful rector's warden, because whilst I was away on holiday Julie and Lyn were kind enough to water my garden.

I was talking in the week and Julie said, "You know, it was actually quite difficult to water your succulents." I said, "Really, why was that?" She said, "Well, when you planted them up you put too much soil in the pots so when you water them the water just runs all over the ground." My wife has actually been saying something similar for months, but it's amazing how it strikes home when an expert tells you something. She said, "There's no room to put any water in the pots," and she's right. What's true of the pot succulents in my garden is true for many 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 fill us with His Spirit?

The lesson I learned from Julie isn't new. It formed the basis of the teaching of the third century desert fathers and mothers. In that tradition there's a famous story of a young man who went to see one of the old desert fathers to learn about prayer, so he just said to the man when he found him in his cell, "Teach me to pray." The old man said nothing in response, but he did start to make a fire. He made a fire and brewed some tea and gave the young man who'd come to see him a cup. He started to pour his tea in the cup and he kept on pouring. He kept on pouring when the cup was already full, so it was running all over the floor. The young man said, "Stop. It's full already." The old man spoke up. He said, "So it is with you. Until you are empty how can you receive what you seek?"

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 find space in

the soul, and they were following the example of Jesus when they did this. We can see in the gospels how Jesus regularly withdrew from all the activity around Him and often went into the wilderness, or into a quiet, lonely place. Here's just a typical verse from the gospel of St. 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." There are verses like that all through the gospels. Before and after all the major events in Jesus' life He went off to be silent and to pray.

Whatever the demands placed upon Him; however busy He was, Jesus always found a time and a place to be alone. His hectic teaching and ministering was constantly punctuated by times of withdrawal, and this was one of the secrets of Jesus' life. This was where He found the strength to follow His Father's will. If we're to follow Him and walk His ways we, too, need to draw on that succor. We, too need to find the time and the place to withdraw to quiet and solitude. We, too, need to punctuate our lives with silence.

Have you ever tried to read a book, or even an article, which has no punctuation? One of my son's essays. They're very, very difficult to read. You can't make sense of them, and there's a great book about the value of punctuation, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, which is all about how the meaning of something is all in the punctuation. It's the punctuation that makes sense of the words. So it is with our lives. It's the punctuation of silence, solitude, and reflection which helps to make sense of our lives and to stop it just being a constant stream of noise and activity.

Actually, the same is true of our services. The very observant amongst you may have noticed that in the last month or two we slightly tweaked the order of service at 10:00, and put in little rubrics that say "silence," or "a period of reflection." I'm hoping that we can keep those, just little moments of silence to punctuate our services, to give a moment of reflection. It's in the quiet, as we turn to God, that we can empty ourselves, that we hand over things. We're all full of something, but it's not always what we want to be full of. I've heard somebody talk about the tyranny of distractions.

I was talking with someone recently whose mind was full of conflicting thoughts and was looking for clarity. As they were trying to sort through what was in their mind, they talked of the debris that they find in their

mind. We've all got too much debris in our hearts and minds. Sometimes all the junk that accumulates over the years has to be cleared out by the Holy Spirit. The Quakers are big into silence, and they talk about the work of the Holy Spirit assisting silence, giving God the space to sift through the debris that accumulates in our lives. If we're to open ourselves up to the work of God we need to be quiet. Ask God by His Spirit to take from us all that stops us being filled by His peace, and His joy, and goodness.

When I was thinking about all this I was reminded of some of the weddings I did in London. We were in a place called Notting Hill, and we had lots and lots of very posh weddings, and I noticed that as a rule of thumb the posher the wedding the less food there was at the reception, so it was not uncommon to go to a wedding which someone had spent thousands of dollars on and you'd be presented at the reception with very, very expensive champagne, and very, very expensive, but very small and light hors d'oeuvres. At this particular wedding that I went to, which was in a very fancy locale, I made sure to be near the kitchen door, because I was experienced at this. I knew you had to be by the kitchen door as all the plates of hors d'oeuvres came out, because if you got stuck on the far end of the room the plates never got anywhere near you. Everybody knows that this is all there is in the plates going round.

So, I'd done very well and I got to the point I was full. I don't know about you but when I get into double figures on fried shrimp that's about all I can take. Just as I was feeling not just full, but I was feeling full to the point of queasiness, the best man stood up and said, "Dinner is now served," and he threw back the doors to this beautiful room with tables laden with food, and beautifully laid up. It was wasted on me. I missed out. I couldn't eat another thing. My stomach was already full.

Jesus invites everyone to a banquet. This communion service is a foretaste of that great banquet which is to come. "Come feast with me," God says. How many of us are ready to respond to that invitation? My fear is that too many people, too many of us, don't hear or answer that invitation as we've already filled ourselves up with spiritual junk food. There's no room left for the real thing, no room to receive the invitation. It gets lost in the debris. When we come to receive communion we come empty-handed. I think that's why I find it ... The

longer I've been in ministry the more moving I find it to give people the host, the bread, at communion, because most of us come to the altar and we come with empty hands. Actually there's no other way to receive. If you bring your purse up, your wallet, or you're struggling with a dog on a leash, where am I gonna put the bread? You have to come empty handed. There's a sign there of what we need to do when we come to God. We come and we bring our emptiness in the hope that God can fill us.

So, as we come forward today I invite you to think of the promise of which Paul speaks that God will fill us with His Holy Spirit. He is the Living Bread. Those who share in this feast have the promise of life in all its fullness, a fullness of good things, not a fullness of the debris we'd rather leave behind. May our empty hands 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 true food of eternity. Amen.