Today is Pentecost Sunday. We know it as the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out into the church, effectively launching the ministry of the gospel in the world. Some Christians call this the birthday of the church. In the Jewish calendar this festival is more known as Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks - Pentecost is the Greek translation of Shavuot, and so it was on Shavuot that the disciples were gathered, for the Jewish festival which celebrated the giving of the Law on Sinai. Just as the first Law was given by the Spirit through Moses in Sinai, so today God’s people are given a new law - the law of the gospel of Jesus Christ, given by the Spirit to every believer.

The Holy Spirit was at large, however, in the world well before that day in Jerusalem, described in the first reading today. The Spirit was at work in the opening drama of creation, bringing life and order into the primeval chaos, described in the memorable word ‘tohuwavohu’ in the opening lines of the book of Genesis. That work undergirds all that is, sustaining and continuing to give it order … The energy and power which sustains life day by day is the Spirit. The writers of the Hebrew Scriptures understood this well, as they describe the way God sends the Sun across the sky each day - the fact that this happens in the same way each day does not make it any less a daily miracle, the action of a loving and sustaining God. (cf. Walt Whitman’s poem, Miracles …)

Just as it is the Spirit who carries forward both the overall life of God day by day, so also the Spirit holds the specific life of God’s chosen people, described in the later books of the Hebrew Bible. And then, ultimately, it is the Spirit who overshadows Mary, so that she bears God’s incarnate Son, human and divine in one person, Jesus Christ - to be the saviour of the world. It is the Spirit, as you may have heard me say before, who creates a People for God – a people who are both shown what to do by the Spirit, and given the power to do it – and joined together in the bond of love, ‘hand in hand in hand’. At the heart of that work of the Spirit is the gift of Jesus Christ – who is both the gift and the giver of the Spirit to humanity – in the glorious cooperation of the Trinity.

The work of the Spirit, for me, is what makes Christianity interesting, and relevant for today. The work of the Spirit invites and enables me to be in partnership with God, and with all of his people, to transform this world into the place of his belonging, the place of his desire, the place of his purposes for the good of all humankind. The work of the Spirit, if you like, is what gets me out of bed in the morning. (That and my alarm clock).

So, if I ask the questions: how should we describe the work of the Holy Spirit, and what has it to do with us today, I could give the same answer to both: everything and everything. The Holy Spirit does everything, and has everything to do with us today!

The Acts reading describes the first conscious experience of the Spirit by Jesus’ disciples. Of course, the Spirit had been at work within them already, helping them to recognise Jesus, and connecting them into his work. But they hadn’t realised that. In truth, anywhere Jesus was, the Spirit was at work. When Peter addressed the crowd early on that Saturday morning, he was trying to help them understand that the same Spirit who had been at work in God’s people throughout their history was now taking things to a whole new level, a new and challenging level, which brought God’s word and his love right up close to everyone who was willing to receive it.

The Gospel reading invites us to hear what Jesus has to say about the Spirit. It’s not the most straightforward reading - rather like the passage from John that David was picking his way through last week. There are a number of variant readings in the original manuscripts, as scribes have tried to tweak it a bit to help readers make sense of it. But at its heart is the message that the Spirit will lead us, and the world, into truth - in other words, the truth of the world as God sees it, the truth of what God is up to into the world. And because God’s truth is not just a truth ’out there’, but a truth ‘in here’, the Spirit helps us not just see the truth, but to apprehend it, to grasp it, to be grasped and transformed by it, and to live it! To be in truth, for John’s gospel, is to be truly alive. The Truth of Life may not be where we expected – the Roman Catholic church in Ireland this weekend finds itself reflecting on that, in the way of
the referendum vote on gay marriage. Where is the truth of life to be found, and when change comes its hard, and of course not always right.

What is truth? Jesus asks this of Pilate. This is truth, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and has given us the the message of reconciliation.: 2 Cor 5.18 - the scripture that every Coventrian should have engraven on their heart. The truth of the gospel is the truth of reconciliation, and it's a truth that we are called not merely to believe, but to live. True life is found where human beings are able to recognise both themselves and one another as Children of God, regardless of their differences and historic enmity. This life is made possible by the grasping of all our hands by Jesus Christ, who steps into the breach that divides, and overcomes it.

How do you define reconciliation? Well, we could come up with so many, but let's stick with this one: putting wrong relationships right. Dealing with whatever makes them go wrong - and that's usually got something to do with fear. Fear of the other, fear of ourselves, far of the unknown, fear that we won't have enough or fear that we are getting a hard deal. All the things that are listed in the Coventry litany of reconciliation. Fear is the opposite of trust: where we trust the other, we will walk with them. Where we trust God, we will walk with anyone, anywhere. And when we are free to walk anywhere, with anyone, we are living in trust, and truly alive as God wants us to be.

This is only possible in the power of the Spirit, who witnesses to us, deep inside, that we are loved by God and can trust him with our eternal lives. I believe that this is the gift of the Spirit to all people - and this is the truth of the gospel. God loves everyone, everyone can be reconciled to him: Jesus died to overcome the enmity which besets the world and invites all to take their place once again as God's beloved children.

We say from time to time in Coventry, 'Reconciliation is not an aspect of the gospel, it is the gospel.' And it's made possible by the work of the Spirit: as Stephen said last Sunday in his address at Evensong, whenever we take a step towards the other, the Spirit is at work. And more than that, it's the Spirit who prompts us to take that step in the first place.

I heard this week that some have suggested that in Coventry we may compromise truth through our commitment to Reconciliation. That's a delightful conundrum, isn't it? Which is more important, truth or reconciliation? What do you think? Perhaps, if both are the fruit of the Spirit, we need to find a way in which they are not in conflict, and that may be by understanding that our version of the truth may not be the only way to look at reality.

The truth is, on this wonderful day of diversity that is Pentecost, that reconciliation calls for a radical renewal of the way we look everything, not least our own lives - in fact, perhaps especially our own lives. Reconciliation begins with me – and the work of the Spirit in helping me to recognise what needs to be addressed in my own life. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, writing about the renewal of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is sometimes called Confession, has this to say:

Renewal in the ministry of reconciliation, however, goes deeper and wider than the style of rite. The ministry of reconciliation is part of the life of the reconciled and reconciling Church. This means a Church aware that it owes its own existence to the reconciliation of the Cross, and has a worship ever deepened by that awareness. It means also a Church which prays for the world with the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ ceaselessly in heart and mind and outgoing action. Within the reconciling prayer and action is the Christian concern about relations with people of other races, about poverty and hunger in the world, about cruelty and injustice, and about weapons of destruction. Within our confession of our sins there will come sins of attitude or complacency or idleness of thought. We are not sinning if we are unsure of the answers to hard questions. We are sinning if we do not think or care. All this is part of a renewed ministry of reconciliation.

On this Pentecost Sunday, God invites us and challenges us to turn back to him in heart and mind, to allow ourselves to be freshly reconciled to him – and to once again be reconcilers in the world.

This is the truth into which we live – a truth that begins in us, and overflows into the world. The truth that will overcome the enmity of Islamic State, the divisions of Israel Palestine, the joy of some and despair of others following an election, or a referendum ... God calls us back into one family, and invites us to live that truth and make it known.