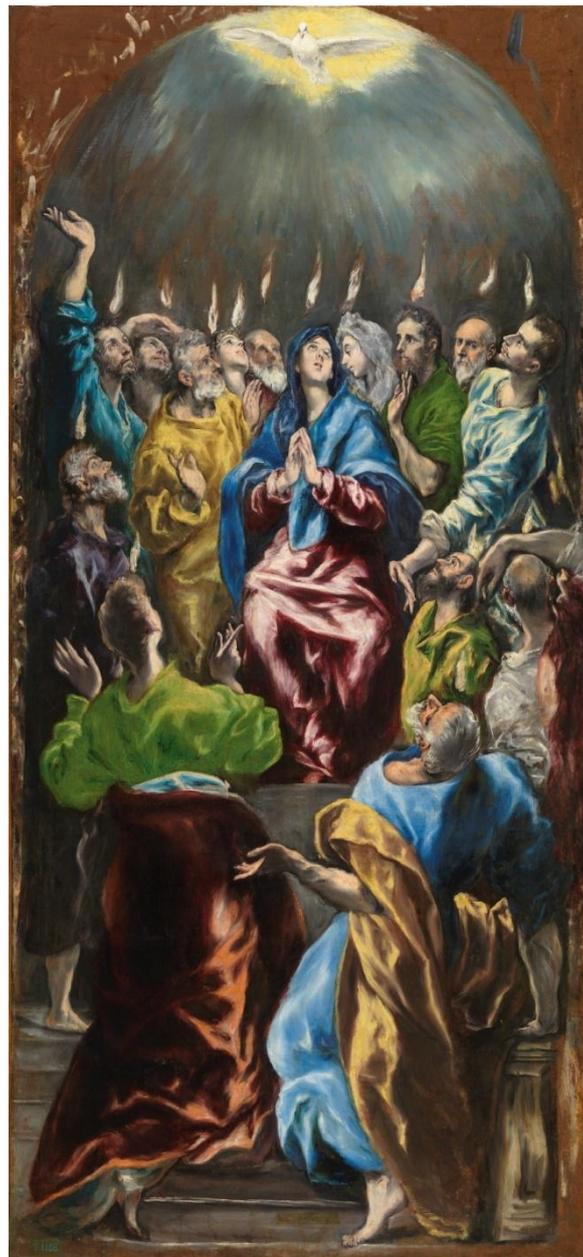


The Sixth Reflection and Music for week of 31 May 2020:

The Feast of the Pentecost

The Chaplain writes, for the next two weeks, I have invited colleagues to write a reflection. This week, Richard Ounsworth OP from Blackfriars reflects on **El Greco's 'Pentecost'**.

Allow me to start by saying that I am no sort of an art critic. If you want expert knowledge, you could do what I have just done and look on the internet, though I must say that I have found nothing particularly inspiring. The cliché is 'I don't know much about art, but I know what I like', but to be honest with you I can't even claim this, because I'm not sure whether I like this painting or not. In my defence, that ambivalence may reflect something that is in



the painting itself. On the one hand, the appearance of tongues of fire is something of a dramatic event, and some of those present for the occasion do seem to be suitably struck by it. Look at those two in the foreground: on their knees, arms opened wide, gazing upwards. Very suitable. The Blessed Virgin Mary in the centre, who by this point in the biblical story has seen a thing or two – starting with an angelic visitation, through the miraculous birth of her son, his miracle at Cana, his disreputable preaching ministry, his horrific and ignominious death to his astonishing resurrection – she is by this point perhaps unflappable, but not blasé, her hands joined in prayer and her eyes raised to the heavenly dove that hovers above her, not for the first time, and the Apostles.

Some, though, are less obviously moved. A couple are looking in completely the wrong direction and one, with the pointed white beard, is looking right at us, totally ignoring what's going on. Apparently that's El Greco himself, so you see I did learn *something* from the internet.

Now the point of all this is that there is something dramatic happening, something that draws the eye, and indeed the ear. But it isn't as dramatic as it might have been. No thunder and lightning, nothing terrifying or overwhelming, not a display of irresistible force. It could have been, but that is not what God's Spirit is all about it. As the prophet Elijah discovered, we find the Spirit of God prototypically not in drama but in the still small voice.

God could have chosen to overwhelm his disciples with the power of his Spirit. He could have made them – he could choose to make every human being – incapable of resisting his love, his power and his glory. And why should he not? This is the climactic moment of the Paschal mystery, the one dramatic turning point of world history that begins with the Cross and ends here in the upper room; it is the culmination of Christ's saving work, the end of the

story that began with the fall of Adam and Eve, and now the wily serpent is supplanted by the innocent dove.

Yes, an ending, a dramatic climax, but also a beginning, as the salvation of humanity that was definitively accomplished 2,000 years ago is worked out in the life of the Church, the lives of millions, billions of individual Christians. Sometimes, that will be a very dramatic working out: some of you reading this may be called to martyrdom – if not literal, bloody martyrdom (but who knows?) then a life given over to self-deprivation and difficulty in the service of your fellow human beings, out of love. And all of us must be *open* to that drama, that possibility of a transformation of our lives by the fire of the Holy Spirit. All of us must be open to sharing in the joy and the passion, the thrill of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But for most it will be far less eye-catching. In the quietness of our everyday lives, in the stillness of our own upper rooms, unnoticed, unsung, we find and share with those around us the gentle mercy of God.

One thing that strikes me – and perhaps this is a reason why I feel ambivalent about the painting – is that it is rather claustrophobic. The disciples are all rather jammed in together, are they not, in a narrow space. And these days being jammed in, stuck in a confined space, is an experience we're all familiar with and perhaps growing tired of. I am a Dominican Friar, which I think makes me very lucky, for all sorts of reasons, one of which is that at least I am stuck at home with twenty other people, in a community established on the principles of Christian love. In fact, Blackfriars is officially the Priory of the Holy Spirit.

But whether you are stuck indoors with twenty others, one or two others who are getting on your nerves, or all alone... if we allow the gentle love of the Holy Spirit to warm you with

the fire of divinity, then perhaps we will find that we can escape the narrow confines of our upper rooms and, in all the languages of the world, sing the praises of God's love.

Prayer for Pentecost

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father,
ignite in us your holy fire;
strengthen your children with the gift of faith,
revive your Church with the breath of love,
and renew the face of the earth,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Notes on Thomas Attwood's 'Come Holy Ghost' by Professor Edward Higginbottom

Perhaps the most famous thing about Thomas Attwood (1765–1838) is that he took composition lessons from Mozart in Vienna in the mid 1780s. This, and his long friendship with Mendelssohn later in life, help us to see him for what he was: a man born in the eighteenth century little troubled by the nineteenth. His chief church appointments were to the Chapel Royal (where he had been a chorister) and to St Paul's Cathedral, where he was organist from 1796. He was appreciated as a man of a kind and genial disposition (in the words of Nicholas Temperley). Something of this character pervades his hymn-anthem *Come Holy Ghost*. The lines of Bishop Cosin's Whitsun hymn are set with artless grace. The pared-down simplicity of the anthem has something in common with Mozart's late *Ave verum corpus*. The absence of complexity or musical intrigue brings with it a directness going straight to the heart of the matter. Attwood is rightly remembered for this jewel in the Anglican repertory. In the St Peter's performance, we have permitted ourselves a vocal rendition of the very short organ interludes. Admittedly, Attwood would have needed to have lived well into the twentieth century to make humming a natural part of his musical style.

EH

