

2. Fire in the depths of the earth (part I)

Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit is a power at work in a continually renewed universe, and is present in the innermost mystery of all things. Grace and science come together to offer a fuller picture of what is true: that God's love is embodied in all humanity, and in the evolving world itself

Breakthrough into new vistas is an essential dimension of Pentecost. This Sunday's Collect implores God to "fill now once more the hearts of believers," encouraging us to expand our horizons. Pentecost, for theologian Karl Rahner, is a vital "hour of courageous vision" in the history of the Church, when the Holy Spirit weaves new patterns out of the "interrelatedness of Creation and Incarnation"

A central path, for him, towards that expansion of the restless heart's horizon, concerns the currently popular question about the divine intention for the Incarnation – did Jesus come to atone for the sin of Adam and Eve, or would he have come anyway?

Beyond doctrinal debate, this is a crucial question with implications for every aspect of our lives, personal and universal. Is there a theology, people ask, other than one based on a fall/redemption supposition, that tells a different story – a story of original grace and beauty rather than of original sin?

By way of reply, theologians point to two schools of theology that are central to our present reflection. One is the familiar sin/ redemption model with its basic themes of reparation and sacrifice. The other is called a theology of nature and grace. Creation, our earth, our bodies, our death, all we mean by the "natural," "the secular," are not the unfortunate results of what Blessed John Henry Newman called "some terrible aboriginal calamity." On the contrary, they are all already graced, and carefully fashioned in the divine image.

But if there was no Fall, people ask, why then are we so sinful, so destructive, so evil? Theologians reply that the act of Creation in the very first place – involving time, space and free will – carries with it the need for redemption. Salvation is implicit in Creation itself.

To be human is to be wounded from the start, to be in need of completion. Love is what completes us. "We were already saved," writes Richard Rohr OFM, "by the gaze from the manger." The terrible death on the Cross is not about an atonement demanded by a punitive Father for one early original sin of disobedience; it reveals, rather, the astonishing love of God for a broken humanity, healing it and charting its course towards its blessed destiny.

An orthodox theology of Creation holds that God, right from the beginning, desired to become human simply because, as St Thomas Aquinas put it, his infinite love needed to express itself outside itself (*bonum est diffusivum sui*) – first in Creation, then finally and fully revealed in Incarnation. And by virtue of solidarity and derivation, this love is embodied to a greater or lesser degree, in all of us and in the evolving world itself . . .

Pentecost reminds us that God's fire already burns in the darkest depths of the living earth. Ultimately, for the Christian, the Holy Spirit is present as the innermost mystery of all things, and may be understood as the invisible power at work in a continually evolving universe, until God be "all in all." There is now no longer a destructive dualism between the things of God and the things of earth. "When we want both the God of infinity and the spirit within the familiar (evolving) universe, as it is, and as it shall become, there is one path to both," writes Rahner.