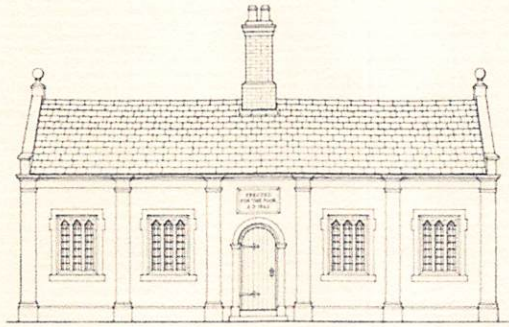




Word from The Almshouse

Pentecost, 2026

The rhododendrons are doing their Pentecost again.

I walked the long way back from chapel this morning, deliberately, because the path past the cedar bends through what must once have been a Victorian planting and is now a kind of slow-motion conflagration. There is a deep cardinal red on the south side that you cannot quite look at directly — the same red as the Pentecost frontal on the altar this morning, which is no accident. We time these things, gardeners and priests, even when we don't know we're doing it. Beside it, an enormous pink one is being almost embarrassing about itself. A bee fell out of a flower as I passed and recovered with some dignity.

The Community of St Cuthbert was founded in 1867 for retired clergy of the Church of England and their wives, on a stretch of rolling country in the south that the founder, a Victorian banker of robust theological views, considered sufficiently far from London to encourage prayer. It is a long range of Bath stone with mullioned windows, a chapel at one end, a refectory at the other, and twenty-two small flats in between where men and women who have spent their lives in the work of the Gospel now live out their last decades in the company of those who have done the same. There are widows here — many of them — and the wives who came in beside their husbands and stayed when the husbands were gone. There is a garden, a gardener, a cook, a chaplain, and a great deal of weather. The rhododendrons are perhaps the founder's loudest legacy. He planted them down both sides of the long path that runs from the lych-gate to the chapel door, with an enthusiasm I think he must, at the time, have regretted by August.

Joseph Hooker would be pleased. He brought most of these up out of the Himalayas in the 1840s, and they have been quietly making themselves at home in English gardens ever since — too at home, in some places. *Ponticum* has gone feral in parts of Scotland and Wales and is, by serious botanical assessment, a menace. I find I cannot quite mind. There is something biblically appropriate about a plant that arrives from elsewhere, sits politely for a century, and then takes over the hillside.

The gardener regards *ponticum* with the considered loathing of a man who has spent twenty years cutting it back. He was at the south border with the long-handled secateurs when I came past, and he raised them in greeting without ceasing his work, which is his usual courtesy. I asked whether the rhododendrons were not, just possibly, pretty. He considered this for a moment, as he considers everything, and said: “Good British dirt. Good British rain. That’s all it takes. After that you can’t get rid of the stuff.” He said it without rancour, the way one speaks of weather, or of the cost of paraffin. It was not the rhododendron’s fault. It was only that the rhododendron did not know when to stop.

I walked on, thinking about this. The gardener has the better of the argument, in the way that gardeners almost always do. They are the ones who have to be there in November, when the priest is in the warm. What they know is dirty and exact and earned, and it makes most of what we say in chapel sound rather thin.

The Chaplain, who is in his late seventies and has a slight stoop, had preached on Acts 2 before the rhododendrons claimed me. He keeps his Pentecost sermon short, on the practical grounds that the Holy Spirit is not, in his experience, a subject that improves with elaboration. “Wind, fire, languages, conversion,” he said this morning from the pulpit, with characteristic economy. “Pentecost is the moment the Church becomes a verb.” He sat down. Five and a half minutes. The choir, slightly thrown by the brevity, took a moment to find their feet for the offertory hymn. The Chaplain has been preaching Pentecost sermons for fifty years and has, somewhere along the way, become certain that the day requires less from him than from the wind.

But the disciples in that upper room knew about arriving from elsewhere. And the wind, when it came, came from elsewhere too, and language broke open and people who had no business understanding each other suddenly did. The thing about Pentecost is that it is not the careful planting of a hedge. It is rhododendron *ponticum*: getting into the soil and refusing to leave. The gardener, if he were Anglican enough to think about it, would say that this is exactly the problem.

I do not mean to over-press the metaphor. The Spirit is not a shrub. But there is, I think, a kind of beauty in the world that is *too much* — that exceeds anything reasonable or in proportion — and Christianity has tended, on the whole, to be nervous about it. We prefer our flowers tasteful, our hymns familiar, our doctrines tidy. The man who planted these rhododendrons a century and a half ago understood something we sometimes forget: that grace is not in good taste.

The cook had made a Whitsun cake. I had not, until this week, known there was such a thing — a currant cake with caraway and a glaze, eaten at Whit since at least the seventeenth century in parts of southern England, and revived at the Community after her predecessor found a recipe in a parish handbook from the 1920s. It sat on the refectory table after Mattins, looking entirely at home, and was reduced by half within ten minutes of being noticed. The cook had baked it at six this morning, while most of us were still in bed. "It's only Pentecost once a year," she said, when I thanked her. This is, I have come to understand, the cook's standard defence for excess.

The Almshouse is quiet at this hour. The bell has rung for noon. There is a woman two doors down who has been here for thirty-one years and remembers when the rhododendrons were waist-high. She told me once that she counts the seasons not by Easter or Michaelmas but by which thing is in flower. I find this a more honest calendar than the one I work to. She would not have much patience with the gardener's view of *ponticum*, I think. Her view is that they are pretty, and that pretty things should be allowed.

It is the Feast of Pentecost as I finish this, and I am going to put the kettle on and read Acts 2 again, slowly, because I think I have been reading it too quickly for years. The Chaplain was right: Pentecost is the moment the Church becomes a verb. The wind is doing its work in the cedars outside my window. The rhododendrons are doing their work along the south border. The Spirit, I trust, is doing His work in places I cannot see — which is, on the whole, how He prefers to operate — although there are wonderful times when He can become quite exuberant. If you have a moment this week, perhaps walk past something that is being too colourful, and let it be too colourful. It may be the most Pentecostal thing you do.

Leonard

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P.S. The bee recovered!