

PENTECOST
St. Paul's, Milford
Pentecost Sunday, 24 May 2015

I spent my early years in Otago. A wonderful place, but probably best not visited in May, June or July unless you're there for winter sports. I always remember in my home parish being taught that Pentecost Sunday (or Whitsunday) is sometimes called 'the birthday of the Church'. It never seemed like much of a party to me! And I was never convinced why the Church would choose a wet, drizzly, cold Sunday that was often during a holiday weekend to celebrate a birthday!

Pentecost is a Greek word meaning 'fifty', so we celebrate Pentecost fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus. For forty days he taught and encouraged his followers, then after his Ascension they waited another ten days for his gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God in action. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is called 'the third person of the Trinity' as if he is a lesser being than God the Father and God the Son. He has been described as 'the neglected member of the Godhead'. In the Apostles' Creed there are at least 10 statements about Jesus Christ and only one about the Holy Spirit and about the same for God the Father.

The neglected person in the Trinity. In 1966 I left the wet, drizzly, cold Sundays of my youth to begin studies at St John's College here in Auckland. And before long I became aware of what we now know as the Pentecostal or charismatic movement within the church. It seemed to have a great impact on many of my fellow students, although I and most of my friends remained unaffected.

Meantime, the others began speaking in tongues, they were baptised in the spirit, they listened to prophecies. They took part in services that went on for 2-3 hours, they went to Bible studies, they listened to tapes, they attended conferences, they listened to the overseas speakers who flocked here. They no longer sang hymns - these were replaced by choruses. Set liturgies were replaced by free forms of prayer. The eucharist gave way to prayer and praise. Reason gave way to emotion. How you felt was more important than what you thought?

Now most of this passed me by. But one couldn't ignore the changes that were taking place or the impact on lives. At the very least one began to take the Holy Spirit a lot more seriously. Whether we like it or not it was the forgotten Person of the Trinity. And that rediscovery of the Holy Spirit is undoubtedly the greatest contribution of the charismatic movement.

At the beginning of time God's Spirit created this universe out of nothing, bringing order out of chaos. As the Psalmist writes: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth.' Some of the amazing images that we see from outer space serve as a reminder that we live in an amazing universe whose beauty is only now being revealed to us.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures – our 'Old Testament' – there is the deep conviction that no one can do the work of God without the Spirit of God; no one can lead others for God who is not led by God's Spirit. The Spirit gives Joseph the skill to rule; he gives Joshua military prowess; he gives skills to a couple of craftsmen and he gives words to the prophets.

The Holy Spirit empowers Jesus, throughout his life and right through his ministry, to teach and to heal. And before he left his followers he gave them a mandate to motivate them for the task ahead. He promised to send the Holy Spirit in his place.

It's wrong to refer to the Holy Spirit as an 'it' or a thing, although the Bible describes his operations as being like the wind, unpredictable or even mysterious. We used to refer to the 'Holy Ghost', but that got in the way. People think of ghosts as spooks. The Holy Spirit is like Jesus, who is like God: thinking, willing and feeling. He possesses all the attributes of any personality: intellect, emotion and will. The Holy Spirit can be grieved and quenched or stifled and ignored. The Holy Spirit 'inspires' people to say what God wants them to say (or to write down). So prophets and Scripture are 'inspired' by the Spirit. The Spirit guides us into the truth about Jesus, about ourselves and about our sinfulness.

When we become a follower of Christ the Holy Spirit enters our lives and he will never leave us. In a sense he's a guest; we've let him in the front door. It's now an exciting (and sometimes scary) process letting him take control of every room in our home. He helps us to pray, to communicate to others about Christ, to love and to do what is right.

And so we talk about being 'filled with the Spirit'. What on earth does that mean? How am I filled with the Holy Spirit? First we must desire him – hungering and thirsting for what is right. We confess our sins. Then we ask him to fill us; if you ask for anything he wants then he'll hear you. Thank him for filling you and by faith live moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day in his power and under his direction. He wants to change us, though our basic temperament remains the same. Paul, for example, was a very aggressive person before his conversion, but the Spirit redirected all that emotional energy towards more positive ends. Being 'filled with the Spirit' simply means being controlled by him.

Are you supposed to 'feel' anything when the Spirit comes into your life? Well, yes and no. Some do; some don't. Some have a 'peak experience' or a 'mountain-top experience' – for a few it's quite powerful. For others it's quite a matter-of-fact transaction. The Spirit operates uniquely in each of us. Remember, he's like the wind – sometimes a hurricane and sometimes a gentle breeze. Indeed, Paul and Luke describe receiving the Spirit in different ways. For Paul 'receiving' the Spirit makes us God's children. For Luke 'receiving' the Spirit gives us power.

The Holy Spirit began to make sense to me when I realised that he is simply God in action. God at work in the world today. God acting in our lives individually and in the life of the church. Some years ago a cynical preacher caused a fuss when he said in one of the cathedrals in Australia: "If the Holy Spirit were removed from this place 99% of what we do here would continue as if nothing had happened!"

Stay open-minded. Don't fall for the law that says 'Nothing should ever be done for the first time'. Instead, opt for the perspective of Charles Schulz, creator of Peanuts. "Life is like a ten-speed bicycle. Most of us have gears we never use." If we could scan a congregation with God's radar then we would probably spot dozens of unused gifts – spiritual capacities lying dormant in the lives of many Christians. Meanwhile, the whole church is poorer.

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