

John Docherty, May 24, 2015

“Pentecost 2015”

According to the commentators I consulted in preparation for this message on the Feast of Pentecost, there were three major Jewish feasts when males were required to present themselves before the Lord : The Feast of Passover, commemorating the liberation from slavery in Egypt; The Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the time spent in the wilderness following this liberation; and the Feast of Pentecost, otherwise known as the Feast of Weeks, celebrating either the first offerings of the wheat harvest, or, more commonly now, the giving of the Law to the People of Israel on Mt. Sinai.

Three major feasts that defined the birth of a people dedicated to God. I think it could be argued that there is a rough parallel here to the three major feasts that define the birth of the Christian church : Christmas – the birth of the Messiah; Easter – Jesus’ resurrection; and Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the clear beginning of the missionary work of the Church following Jesus’ resurrection.

This last Jewish understanding of Pentecost, the giving of the Law to Moses, is an interesting parallel to the Christian understanding of what happened during the feast of Pentecost as recorded in the Book of Acts.

The giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai could well be viewed as the point at which the covenant between God and the people of Israel was formalised. It’s the pivotal moment around which life was subsequently ordered. ***This*** moment, this receiving of the Ten Commandments, even more than the promise to Abraham, defined how the relationship between God and the chosen people was to be lived out. It set the parameters of faithfulness, and provided a guide for right living.

Without the Ten Commandments, without ***this earlier*** Pentecost, the Hebrews of the day risked being little more than a tribal group wandering about through the generations as a cultural community defined by historical family ties and acquired habits, rather than a people with a structured set of legal and moral imperatives that gave their lives direction and meaning.

With the Ten Commandments, we see the real birth of a community of faith that will ultimately change the history of the world.

Likewise, this new Pentecost, this Christian Pentecost, has been called the “Birthday of the Church”; the day when the mission to make disciples of all the nations was finally put into motion. With the Holy Spirit’s coming upon the disciples gathered together on that day, a new movement is kick-started, and this earlier Pentecost is now complete : the Covenant with God has been established on Sinai, and now the Spirit needed to spread that Covenant throughout the world has been given also.

According to Peter, who speaks to the crowd on that day, the prophecy of Joel is now fulfilled : “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit ...”

This, like the event on Mt. Sinai, is a pivotal moment; a moment that will, in its turn, also change the history of the world.

But, what actually happened that day? How are we to understand this sound like the rushing of wind and these tongues of fire? What does it mean to say that the Holy Spirit “filled” all of those present in this place?

One common understanding of Pentecost is that *this* is the moment when the Holy Spirit first makes an appearance in the lives of men in some way that is new; a manifestation of the power of God that has been heretofore unknown.

And while it may be true that something profoundly important has just happened, this is not our first exposure to the Spirit of God.

We’re told, right at the outset, in Genesis, chapter one, that “... the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”

In chapter two we’re told that “... the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being ...”. The Spirit of God has been literally ‘breathed’ into our bodies. I brought a meditation a couple of years ago in which I ruminated about God being in our DNA; sustaining us directly as we live our lives. Somehow, all of us already have something of that divine spark, the Spirit of God.

All through the Old Testament, we’re told of many instances when the Spirit of God comes upon this or that prophet.

Genesis 41.38:

“Pharaoh said to his servants (regarding Joseph), ‘Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the **spirit** of God?’”

Exodus 31.3:

(speaking of one of the craftsmen who were to build the ark of the covenant) “... I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft ...”

Numbers 11.25:

“Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to (Moses), and took some of the **spirit** that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the **spirit** rested upon them, they prophesied.”

Numbers 24.2:

“Balaam looked up and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. Then the **spirit** of God came upon him ...”

Judges 3.10:

(speaking of one Othniel) “The **spirit** of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel ...”

Judges 6.34:

“But the **spirit** of the LORD took possession of Gideon”

Judges 11.29:

“Then the **spirit** of the LORD came upon Jephthah”

Judges 14.6:

(speaking of Samson) “The **spirit** of the LORD rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as one might tear apart a kid.”

1 Samuel 10.6:

(speaking of Saul) “Then the **spirit** of the LORD will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person.”

1 Samuel 16.13:

“Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the **spirit** of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.”

2 Chronicles 15.1:

The **spirit** of God came upon Azariah son of Oded.

2 Chronicles 24.20:

Then the **spirit** of God took possession of* Zechariah son of the priest Jehoiada”

Job 27.3:

“... as long as my breath is in me, and the **spirit** of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood and my tongue will not utter deceit”

Isaiah 61.1:

“The **spirit** of the Lord GOD is upon me”

Ezekiel 11.5:

“Then the **spirit** of the LORD fell upon me”

Micah 3.8:

“But as for me, I am filled with power, with the **spirit** of the LORD”

Even in the New Testament, after Jesus’ resurrection, but before this event on the day of Pentecost, we read this in the Gospel of John : “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.”

So what are we to make of this day of Pentecost event? What is different about what has happened here, if anything, compared to what has happened on these other occasions? In particular, why is this event necessary, when Jesus has already given the Holy Spirit to his disciples?

Well, in one respect I suppose there is nothing very different. The Spirit of God is recognised as being at work, and the people involved have a very clear sense of this being the case.

These people, these simple Galileans, these men and women who have been huddled in fear since Jesus’ death and resurrection, these people upon whom the Spirit has now rested in a particular way, are being nudged out of their comfort zone. They’re finally finding the wherewithal to take up the responsibility to complete the mission started by Jesus.

It seems to me that the miracle here is not so much the fact that they are speaking in languages that are understood by everyone in the crowd. The miracle is that

ordinary men and women who have been hiding in a corner, are now finding the courage to take up the challenge of spreading the good news of Jesus' life and ministry.

They are beginning to find the courage to accept that they each have a role in discerning how God is at work in the world, and participating directly in that work.

They are finding the courage to show to those responsible for the religious institutions that the gift of the Holy Spirit is no longer limited to the occasional prophet or exceptional person – and it is certainly not limited to the religious institutions – it is now available to any who truly seek after God.

And this means, in part, that each person is now free to follow the dictates of the Spirit.

But we know that this gift of the Spirit of God is not without its own challenges. The letters of Paul to the various churches that grew up over the next generation or so highlight the many risks involved in giving this kind of freedom and power to each and all.

Being free to follow the dictates of the Spirit is not being free to do whatever one wants.

Community discernment is a messy affair.

How much easier things can sometimes be when there is a ruling authority who can dictate right and wrong; who can declare what is true and what is false; who can make decisions for us on the important questions of life.

A beneficent dictator *can* sometimes be the most efficient way of structuring things. Unfortunately, dictators tend not to be particularly beneficent for very long. The old adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely has a lot of truth to it.

So what happens when this absolute power is distributed among everyone? What happens when the Spirit of God is distributed to all those who profess to follow Christ?

As I said, things can get messy.

We have to pay attention to the guidance that has been provided to us in this Book.

We have to listen to that still, small voice that speaks to each of us individually and helps us understand and interpret the guidance provided by this Book.

And we have to listen to each other.

And that, I think, is the biggest challenge in trying to follow the nudgings of the Holy Spirit – we need to trust, first of all, that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work as we try to decide what it means to be a faithful community; and we need to trust that we are all seeking to make the right decision as led by the Holy Spirit individually.

And we need to be willing to take whatever time is necessary to be sure that we have heard each other, and the Spirit.

This afternoon we have yet another MFM congregational meeting; another occasion to try to discern together how to move forward as a community.

I've said a number of times in the past that I'm not much of a mystic, and by that I mean that I don't seek or expect esoteric experiences of God.

I seek and expect to experience God in the simple things of daily life.

I haven't noticed any "sound like the rush of a mighty wind" this morning, or noticed any tongues of fire dancing above anyone's head.

But that doesn't mean that I don't believe that the Holy Spirit is here with us.

I do believe that.

And I do believe that as we discuss our options this afternoon, and perhaps as we disagree on how best to move forward, that we are participating in an act of faithful attention to God, whatever decisions are ultimately taken.