

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 31 MAY 2020

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1 **Being ready for worship**

Today is Pentecost, the Sunday when we remember and celebrate the granting of the Holy Spirit. It is the second act of the Ascension which we marked last Sunday. Jesus' departure was followed by the fulfilment of his promise to send the *Paraclete* to look out for his followers once he had gone from among them. Of course now we recognise the Holy Spirit as one of the persons of the Trinity. Today is thus a day of celebration, that in the person of the Spirit who dwells among us, God himself is quite literally with us, and within us. Remind yourself of that wonderful fact, and begin when you feel settled and ready.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

The prayer that follows is the Lectionary reading from the Psalms set for today. For those who first encounter the Lectionary, there is often an assumption that there should be some theme that unites the (usually) four readings that are set. For much of the year, however, that is not the case at all, and people have spent fruitless hours looking for, or inventing, connections that just aren't there. At particular times of year, though, there is indeed a deliberate connection, and Pentecost is one such time. All the readings offered for today by the Lectionary mention the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Spirit appears in a number of ways. Psalm 104 is typical of one of these ways – God's breath (both the Hebrew and Greek words for "breath" and "spirit" are the same) is the source of life. In this psalm, the psalmist reminds us that, upon the withdrawal of God's breath, living things "die and return to the dust". It is a most appropriate prayer of praise for Pentecost Sunday.

How many are your works, LORD!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number—
living things both large and small.
There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.
When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.
May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works—
he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
who touches the mountains, and they smoke.

I will sing to the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the LORD.
Praise the LORD, my soul.
Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

You may find this prayer helpful, or choose to pray your own more personal prayer, or to pray a combination of each. God is always ready to hear our confession.

Our Father, you are indeed to be praised.
For you accept us in all our sinfulness and transgression.
We confess again that we are a sinful people,
driven by our own desires, our own interests and our own agendas.
We have not loved our neighbours as we love ourselves,
and we have not loved each other as you have loved us.
We look in wonder and awe at the great sacrificial love
which you have poured out on us through Jesus our Lord,
and we know that we have never been so loving,
and that such love is just not in us.
Forgive us for who and what we are,
strengthen us to be more the people you would have us be,
and imbue us with the love in which we are so lacking.
For we ask it in the name of the one whose love for others overflows,
Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Saviour.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

Remember the wonderful words in John's gospel (John 3:17f):
*God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him.
Whoever believes in him is not condemned.*
So we can be confident that, in the risen Christ,
our sins are forgiven.
That is the gospel of our salvation.

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Acts 2:1-21

John 20:19-23

I Corinthians 12:3b-13

The other Lectionary Readings

Numbers 11:24-30

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

John 7:37-39

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

7 Prayers for the world and Lord's Prayer

Friday was International Day to End Obstetric Fistula. Putting that together with the recent death of Catherine Hamlin, the extraordinary Australian woman who devoted her entire life to assisting the women of Ethiopia with fistula surgery, and the fact that she is a wonderful exemplar of somebody in whom the gifts of the Spirit took root and bore great fruit, the prayer that follows is for all such dedicated people, particularly in the field of medicine. You may choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Lord of God,

We come before you to give thanks for the life of Catherine Hamlin,
and for her tireless efforts to assist the women of Ethiopia through her skills as a surgeon.

We give you thanks that her Christian faith led her to want to make a difference in the world,
that she used her gifts to turn around the lives of many thousands of women,
and to show the outworking of love in the most practical ways.

We pray for those who will continue her work, and pray that you will bless them.

Her death makes us think of other medical people who also serve the world in many places.

Their names are mostly unknown to us,

but we give thanks for the men and women of Medicin Sans Frontieres,
who serve in some of the most dangerous and challenging parts of the world.

Only weeks ago, one of their facilities in Afghanistan sustained an horrific attack;
and yet they continue to put their lives at risk to minister to others.

We pray for all their personnel, and ask that you would bless their work.

We give thanks for those who serve in refugee camps around the world,
bringing healing to the destitute,

who are often the victims of disease, deprivation and injury.

They also find themselves exposed to dangers,
from the situations in which they find themselves
as well as from the diseases they must confront.

We pray for them all, and ask that you bless their work.

We pray for those, too, who work amongst the world's poorest people –
for those to minister to the victims of Ebola, of AIDS, or tuberculosis,
indeed of so many diseases that continue to afflict some of the poorest nations and peoples.

We pray for them all, and ask that you bless their work.

Father, our prayer extends beyond the doctors themselves,
to the other professionals and carers who complement their work:
for the nurses, the physiotherapists, the pharmacists and others.

Medicine involves teamwork, and everyone is a valuable member of the team.

We pray for them all, and ask that you bless their work.

For, our Father,

we know that so many of these selfless people could be working in wealthy countries,
earning handsome incomes, supported by excellent facilities,
and in an environment where hygiene is possible through clean water and ample supplies.

We give you thanks that so many caring people are not deterred by hardships,
indeed are motivated by their deep concern to relieve human suffering,
even in the most difficult and dangerous locations and conditions.

We pray that such a spirit of service might touch many more,
causing them to offer their gifts

where their value will far exceed what they can contribute in wealthier societies.

May the love that they bring to those for whom they care
shine a light which serves as a beacon of peace in our troubled world,
to sound the message that love will always be stronger
than the darkest forces of humanity and nature.

May they be an inspiration to all people everywhere,
and a reminder that true freedom is only to be found in serving others.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

8 **Conclusion**

Jesus commissioned his disciples to mission, saying,
As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.
If we believe that Jesus was sent by God,
then we too are commissioned to mission in the world.
As you return to the rest of your Sunday,
and to the world of the everyday,
think on with what gifts the Spirit has endowed you,
and resolve anew to nurture them and use them with love,
in the great work of bringing the love of God to the world.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT

Last week, we reflected on the difficulty experienced by Luke, the writer of Acts, in describing the mysterious event which saw Jesus somehow transported from the apostles' physical presence to the realm of the Father. It was an occurrence of which they had absolutely no doubt, yet one where the limitations of human language frustrated their attempts to describe it.

That we face a similar situation today, on the day of Pentecost, is not always recognised. Although the Lectionary offers us a variety of readings that relate to the Holy Spirit, the favourite for Pentecost is undoubtedly the passage from Acts chapter 2, in which a truly dramatic event is described. The eleven disciples were gathered in a room together.

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

So dramatic were the events that the crowd outside gathered to see what was going on. The emboldened apostles emerged from their fearful hideaway, and were enabled to speak to the crowd in such a way that many – though clearly not all (as some concluded that the apostles were merely drunk) – were able to understand them, irrespective of the various languages represented in their midst, for the list of places of origin given by Luke covers much of the Roman world. Peter, who only weeks before had succumbed to his fears and denied Jesus, preached the very first Christian sermon, and the work of evangelism had begun.

Luke says that the sound was “like” a violent wind; the disciples saw something that “seemed” to be tongues of fire. The similes betray his inability adequately to describe what actually occurred. Clearly what is important to Luke is to capture the drama of it all. The Holy Spirit had descended on the apostles, and the proclamation of the gospel had begun under the power of that Spirit.

However the Lectionary also offers us John's account of the same phenomenon. It is sometimes referred to as “John's Pentecost”, and it is superficially a very different rendition. As in Acts, the disciples are gathered together in a room, but John adds that this was out of fear of the authorities. Suddenly the risen Christ comes and stands amongst them, and assures them of his identity by showing them his wounds from the cross. Then,

.... Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

In John's account, we hear nothing of the curious crowd outside, or of the speaking in tongues, or of Peter's first sermon. On the surface, it is very different. You can certainly find commentators who seek to fit both these accounts of Pentecost into a sequence, so they can both be literally true; but it is pretty clear that they are really different narratives of the same event. That ought not to trouble us in any way.

Luke had struggled to find the words to express the drama of what had occurred, resorting to figures of speech and images. John's account is more concise, even understated and matter-of-fact, but for all that no less dramatic. The heart of the story in each instance is the same. Jesus' disciples are gathered together, when Jesus fulfils the promise he had made to them, the granting of the Spirit, which comes upon them all in an unmistakable manner, completely changing them. In both accounts, this is all about mission – in Acts, the disciples immediately go forth to proclaim the good news to the multitude of nations; in John Jesus specifically commissions them: “I am sending you.”

This event is the beginning of the Church, and is often celebrated as the Church's birthday. It is the beginning of the great mission of proclaiming the gospel to the entire world, and of bringing the saving power of the risen Christ, and the love of God, to all peoples. Pentecost is a signal event in the history of the Church. Both Luke's and John's accounts are limited by the language available to describe the indescribable, yet both bear witness to something which was not only a dramatic story, but was the beginning of the great mission which brought Christian hope to an ever-increasing number of people in ever-wider circles. Today, Christianity is the world's most numerous religion, with some 2.3 billion adherents. It is right and proper that we celebrate Pentecost!

It has often been pointed out that the Spirit of God had been a presence since the beginning of time. In the Genesis account of creation, the very first verse tells us that, when the world had yet to take form, "The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Gen 1:1). The first human was created from the dust, but became a living being only when God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen 2:7). In the Old Testament, it is God's Spirit which sustains life, and its withdrawal is death (*e.g.* Psalm 104:29, *cf* Ezekiel 37). In that sense, the Old Testament tradition is that all living things have something of the Spirit within them. However, in something of a different way, the full granting of the Spirit in the Old Testament is reserved for leaders and prophets – for a very small number of people designated by God by the granting of his Spirit to them. The Spirit was upon Moses, and when God appointed seventy Elders to assist Moses, he withdrew portion of that Spirit and granted it to them (Numbers 11:17). When Saul was anointed as Israel's first king, "the Spirit of the LORD" came upon him (I Samuel 10:6-10); and when Saul lost favour and the kingship was passed to David, the Spirit instead passed to him (16:13f). The granting of the Spirit was a special way of designating to the community that a particular person had been commissioned by God.

But Pentecost changed all that. It was the pervasiveness of the gift of the Holy Spirit to all believers which set Christians and their new faith apart from the faith of God's peoples in former years. The essential difference was simple but profound: previously, God's Spirit had dwelt *among* his people, granted to but a few; henceforth, God's Spirit would be a gift to all believers, and would dwell *within* them.. Literally, within them.

That the Spirit now dwells *within* us is both a daunting and an exhilarating prospect. That each follower of the risen Lord Jesus literally has a God-presence within them is surely a gift beyond words. The Spirit's work is to build us up, and in building us up, to build up the Church. How does that happen?

Although there are many answers to that question in the New Testament, today's reading from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth provides an excellent one. (See all chapters 12-13.) Paul's answer is deceptively simple, for it is in fact utterly profound. The Spirit does his work by granting different and complementary gifts to believers. "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them."

To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Comparing the interworking of these diverse gifts with the different parts of the human body, Paul goes on to point out that every gift has its importance and value, even the most humble, and that each is an essential part of the community. In that very real sense, the presence and gifts of Holy Spirit are at the heart of every Christian community; the Spirit endows the gifts needed by that group of believers to cease to be a collection of individuals, and to come together as a whole, as a part of the body of Christ. Famously, of course, Paul goes on to caution that no gift is of any worth

if its exercise is not governed by love. From this warning, it should be clear that the gifts of the Spirit are not some kind of magic; they can be misused and things can go wrong.

The gift of the Spirit within us needs to be treasured, to be nurtured, to be developed. That dramatic moment – that experience beyond words – when God grants his Spirit can be the planting of a seed that germinates, grows, flourishes and bears fruit; or it can see the seed wither and die, or grow into something deformed and unhelpful.

In that context, it's difficult not to think of Jesus' parable of the sower. This is Matthew's version of the parable:

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:3-8)

Jesus said that the parable referred to hearing the Word of God; it might just as easily refer to receiving the Holy Spirit. Because the Spirit too could and can fall on rocky ground; it too can land in shallow soil; it too can be choked by other forces that stymie its growth.

If we return for a moment to Luke's account of Pentecost, you may recall that at least the twelve disciples were present and received the Spirit on that occasion. Luke gives us a list of their names: with Judas gone from the group, there remained Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James, Simon and another Judas. Judas the betrayer had been replaced by Matthias, so again there were twelve. At least these twelve men were present, heard the sound "like the wind", saw the phenomenon "like a tongue of fire" reach down and touch them: each of them received the Spirit.

Yet it's often remarked that we hear virtually nothing more about a number of them. Certainly not in the New Testament. There are traditions in the early Christian writers about some of them. In some of them, no doubt, the Spirit *did* take root. It may well have been some of them who were the unknown evangelists who founded the churches in the two greatest cities of the empire – Rome itself, and Alexandria. But it's hard not to wonder if some of them simply disappeared from history because, in them, the seed of the Spirit did not take root. Remember – the granting of the Spirit was a commissioning for mission. Were some of the apostles overwhelmed by fear, or the difficulties involved, or by the cares of the world, or simple inertia? Did some of them prove stony ground in which the seed of the Spirit could not grow? We will never know, but it is certainly possible.

And what about us? This day of Pentecost reminds us that *we* have all been granted the gift of the Spirit. The Church's birthday makes us recall that the birthday gift was given to *us*. We have all had that experience that defies expression, that cannot be put into words. Each of us has had the tongue of fire touch us, the seed implanted within us. Has it taken root in us? Have we nurtured the growth of the Spirit within us, through Word and Sacrament, through prayer and worship? Have we given our most fertile soil over to the Spirit, where it will grow and flourish and bear much fruit?

Or has it fallen on rocky ground and taken no root? Did it fall among the thorns, to have the life choked out of it by the cares of the world? What have *we* done with the precious gift of Pentecost? Has it been for us a commissioning for mission? Have we allowed it to transform us into the apostles of our Lord? This day calls on us to reflect on what we have done, and what we are doing, with God's great gift to us. Has it transformed us and commissioned us and led us? Is the Spirit at the heart of our community and our life?