

## Pentecost

St Brandon's

Acts 2: 1-21; John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15

19 May 2024

The Day of Pentecost has arrived. The Apostles and presumably other disciples are all together in one house – it must have been a big house! There is a sound like the rush of a violent wind; divided tongues as of fire rest on *each* of them; *all* of them are *filled* with the Holy Spirit; and *all* of them, so it seems, begin to speak in other languages.

The Holy Spirit arrives in a kind of holy chaos, disrupting the normal order of things. The sound like the rush of a violent wind is enough to attract the attention of passers-by, and a crowd gathers. And it's a huge crowd from all over the place. They welcome Peter's explanation of what's going on and his (following our passage) proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. And 3,000 people are baptised and added to the numbers of believers that very day (Acts 2: 41). Wow!

Focused on the lives of individuals and the church, here is a dramatic, powerful, chaotic, disruptive, life-changing Spirit. Is that how we experience the Holy Spirit as individuals and as church?

But what about our reading from John's gospel, and Jesus speaking about the Holy Spirit there? Jesus speaks, apparently calmly and logically, about the Holy Spirit as Advocate (which has a legal connotation), but alternatively translated as helper, comforter, counsellor, companion, even friend according to *The Message*. And this is the Spirit of truth who guides us into all the truth. And this is the Holy Spirit who takes direct action in the world by proving the world wrong about sin, righteousness and judgement. This is the Holy Spirit who declares to us the things that are to come, and who glorifies Jesus. This is the Holy Spirit who does all of this in the unity of the Trinity.

Here is an equally powerful, but much calmer, truth-proclaiming Spirit, who is also at work in the world independent of us as individuals or church. Is that how we experience the Holy Spirit?

You might guess that I am, in general, much more 'comfortable' with the second type of Holy Spirit, the comforter. But, in preparing this sermon, I had an interesting and quite alarming experience. The way I usually work when preparing sermons is to start from the readings, then I might read other things – commentaries, books or parts of books I've read before (or that Alison has read before and recommends) – and then, a theme or a focus emerges, and some structure to go with it. Then I'm 'comfortable' and can get on and write it down.

But as I went through this same process this time, no particular theme, no particular structure emerged. Help! But it then occurred to me that this might actually be the Holy Spirit at work, introducing a bit of chaos, being disruptive of my usual pattern, making me not comfortable but uncomfortable. I sensed the Holy Spirit as being somewhat mischievous! As having a good old laugh at my expense! 'So what are you going to do now then, Geoff, when I've disrupted your usual pattern?'

Well, maybe I should have quit at that point (and maybe you'll agree!) But, I'd already got some material together, it was just that I couldn't see a pattern or theme. So, what follows is a somewhat random set of thoughts and stories from two books that I had dipped into, plus a few additional thoughts of my own.

The first book (sorry – structure immediately – I just can't help it!) is John Taylor's *The Go-between God. The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, a classic published in 1972. Here are a few statements I jotted down (there were a couple of others, one rather long, which I've left appended in the written version that will be available online afterwards). And, of its time, there is no gender-neutral language here; and I've left the quotes as they were in the original.

The first picks up the difference between the two ways of understanding the Spirit that we noticed from our readings. 'In Acts, Luke lays special emphasis upon the direct communications which the apostles received from the Holy Spirit [as we've seen], and on the gifts of healing, exorcism, prophecy and speaking with tongues. In the epistles as a whole [but also, perhaps, in John's gospel, as we've see], this balance is redressed, and although they contain plenty of references to gifts, healing and so on, life in the Holy Spirit is associated mainly with a new relation to God, expressed in the words 'sonship' and 'liberty', and a new degree of love, of life-for-others, which the authors expressed in the phrases 'the fellowship of the Spirit' (2 Cor 13: 14; Phil 2: 1), and 'the servanthood of the Spirit' (2 Cor 3: 8; Gal 3: 5). But, as in the life of Jesus, so now in the life of the church, the 'wild-wind' quality of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the release of a peculiar freedom and a certain strangeness and incalculability.'<sup>1</sup>

'The Spirit of God is that power of communion [hence, the go-between God of the book's title] which enables every other reality, and the God who is within and behind all realities, to be present to us.'<sup>2</sup>

'The Holy Spirit is universally present through the whole fabric of the world, and yet uniquely present in Christ and, by extension, in the fellowship of his disciples.'<sup>3</sup>

'The Holy Spirit speaks to the man-in-the-street as well as to the man-in-the-pew.'<sup>4</sup>

'The whole weight of NT evidence endorses the central affirmation of the Pentecostals that the gift of the Holy Spirit transforms and intensifies the quality of human life, and that this is a fact of experience in the lives of Christians.'<sup>5</sup>

'In the last analysis it is the transforming gift of the Spirit that makes a man a Christian. For anyone who is in Christ there is no further gift to be sought, though he may need to 'stir into flame again' the gift he has already received (2 Tim 1: 6).'<sup>6</sup>

'The NT speaks not so much of the Spirit in the one as of the Spirit in the midst of the two or three.'<sup>7</sup>

The other book I re-read parts of was Selina Stone's *Tarry Awhile. Wisdom from Black spirituality for people of faith*, which I had used, some of you may remember (or not), in a sermon back in Lent. Selina is from a Pentecostalist background, and has some good points and lovely stories in her chapter on the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> John Taylor, *The Go-between God. The Holy Spirit and the Christian mission*. SCM Press, 1972, p.201.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, op. cit., p.19.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, op. cit., p.180-1.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, op. cit., p.182.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, op. cit., p.199

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, op. cit., p.200.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, op. cit., p.200.

She says of the Holy Spirit: 'An often overlooked member of the Trinity ... she is named as breath and wind in the Scriptures. Breath is the very basis for life and movement for our bodies and in the natural world.'<sup>8</sup>

'The Holy Spirit is not so easy to categorise. She disrupts our pride. She humbles our attempts to have a handle on God, to presume we know and understand God. The Spirit undermines any illusion that we can hold God captive to our fantasies and agendas.'<sup>9</sup>

Selina tells a story of the beginning of Pentecostalism in a Black congregation in Los Angeles in the early 1900s. The Spirit was very much alive and at work then as she was on the day of Pentecost. 'They called it a 'revival', a moment of being energised, revitalised and empowered by God's Spirit. As they gathered to pray, they became overwhelmed by the sense of God's presence. Many responded by repenting of their sins and accepting Jesus as their Saviour. Those who had sicknesses reported being healed on the spot, and many spoke languages they had never learned. People shouted for joy, rolled on the floor and danced together until they sweated. They cried, laughed, prayed until they lost their voices. They were working-class Black folks, washerwomen, labourers and those working in the service industry. In their daily lives they were low on the scale of importance, but here they danced in the presence of God's own self.'<sup>10</sup>

Selina also tells a story of her own, of being nudged by the Holy Spirit first to go and give a talk on a Saturday night – something she usually wouldn't do. And after the talk, another nudge and a feeling that she needed to hang back. And then she was approached by and prayed for and with a number of Roma women. It's a very moving and emotional story which speaks of discernment being given by the Holy Spirit at an individual level.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to my own thoughts, this last story raises for me the question of being open not only on an individual basis to the promptings of the Spirit, but also, since the Spirit works in the midst of us, how we collectively discern the promptings of the Spirit. What is the Spirit saying to the Church, to us as Church now? How would we discern that?

Then, in relation to stirring into flame again the gift of the Holy Spirit that we have already received, a familiar prayer I use is this: 'Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in us the fire of your love'. It's, to be honest, a scary prayer inviting the Holy Spirit in.

Then, since we understand that the Spirit is universally present through the whole fabric of the world including the natural world, another prayer I use, which we have in our Easter dawn vigil, but which I use specifically in relation to climate change is this, 'Send forth your Spirit O Lord and renew the face of the earth'.

And more generally and to close, a doxology that I came across so long ago that I don't recall where it was from, but which I use frequently. So instead of:

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen.*

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<sup>8</sup> Selina Stone, *Tarry Awhile. Wisdom from Black spirituality for people of faith*. SPCK, 2023, p.76-7.

<sup>9</sup> Stone, op. cit., p.81.

<sup>10</sup> Stone, op. cit., p.87.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, op. cit., p.92-3.

this runs:

*Glory to you, Father Almighty, to you Lord Jesus Christ the Son, to you Holy Spirit alive and at work in: [and then, as appropriate], our hearts; your church; your world both now and for ever. Amen*

#### Appendix – other quotes

The spirit of man is that faculty which enables each of us to be truly present to another.<sup>12</sup>

But St Paul was at pains to emphasize that the more unusual charismata, or grace-gifts, of the Holy Spirit are not themselves of the essence of the Spirit-filled life. They are marked by a certain transience; it is in their nature to 'pass away'. This does not mean they are going to disappear from the experience of the church after the apostolic age, but we are not to expect of them the same permanence as belongs to the faith, hope and love of the Spirit-filled life. The fulness of the Spirit is known primarily in a new degree of communal awareness of the reality of God and the reality of Jesus Christ, and in a new communal sensitiveness towards other people. When these are present there can be nothing lacking. Life in the Spirit is totally unself-regarding, and any anxiety over the possession or loss of special powers or privileges is quite foreign to it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Op cit., p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, Op cit., p.201-2.