



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Day of Pentecost

Sunday, May 31, 2020

Scripture Passages: Acts 2:1-21 & John 20:19-23

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is Pentecost – some call it the Church’s birthday. But of course those early Christian who were trying so hard to do the right things in the days after Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension had absolutely no sense of the momentous edge they were standing on. None until the Spirit arrived that is.

So, there was a violent wind and then there was fire – and those came amidst the anxiety of a community that’s huddled together in fear. That doesn’t sound too comfortable to my ears. Neither does the next bit of the story – suddenly the disciples are out on the busy streets of Jerusalem – apparently speaking all known languages in an ecstasy of the Holy Spirit. Nothing like a scene like that to dent your credibility with people who know what “right” religion looks like so it’s no wonder that folks thought they were drunk.

The Spirit doesn’t care about propriety though. Nor could we describe the Holy Spirit as easy. I reckon that the Spirit is grittier and more uncompromising and demanding than we’d like most days. And yet there’s something very beautiful about the presence of the Holy Spirit too.

The anointing dove, the rushing wind, the enlivening fire, the cleansing water - all these are images for the spirit. Jesus calls the spirit the Comforter, the Advocate, the spirit of truth. The Holy Spirit is part of that beautiful mystery of the triune God – the three in one.

What can we say about the effects of the Spirit’s presence? Well we know it when we feel it and see it, that’s for sure. It’s an incredible gift. It’s that profoundly wonderful thing that happens to believers when their hearts are strangely warmed – to quote a famous Christian (John Wesley) and changed. When we suddenly get a glimpse of heaven, when something is accomplished here on earth that we none of us expected or could have predicted.

The Holy Spirit is strength in adversity, unexpected generosity, the bringer of peace and understanding, the lover of community, the great persuader, the protector, and the emboldener.

There's something here that important for us to notice about the Spirit's presence - actually it's crucial for us to notice – and that's how the Spirit works. It's easy to miss. You see the Spirit acts with us; alongside us. But we have to be in that partnership.

As a young adult, I had an experience of many of these aspects of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit - especially the alongside bit - and it was as uncomfortable and wonderful as it was unforgettable.

Way back in the mists of time - in 1986, I was asked to be a youth delegate to the General Council of the United Church. We met in Sudbury, Ontario. It was the year that a motion was tabled, in response to the request of Indigenous Peoples, to make a a long, overdue formal apology for the harm – cultural, spiritual, social - which had been inflicted on them by the colonialism of generations of settlers.

And as I've reflected on this experience over the years, I think the thing I remember about the deliberations over the motion, was the fear and uncertainty in the process. I remember that at the time, this decision was controversial – many felt that to apologize was to devalue the sacrifices of those same settlers and forbears. Of course there were many, many more who recognized the imperative to acknowledge the evils of colonialism and to work toward reconciliation. And that was absolutely right as we know.

As long as I live, I'll never forget the scene when we debated the final motion: I remember how the process was bound up in prayer and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The General Council delegates and First Nations peoples began the meeting separately. The delegates met in a hall to take a vote whether to make our apology or not – because it was not a done deal. There was strong and emotional feeling on both sides of the question. There were about a thousand people gathered in our meeting room. When the vote was taken the air was electric. And when it came back overwhelmingly in favour, well, I just can't describe it; it was an historic moment to be sure and I knew that on some level, making an apology – however inadequate – to Indigenous Peoples had been a step towards bridging the divide between settler and Indigenous Peoples

I have to say that it was pretty amazing to walk down to where the First Nations people were camped in teepees with huge bonfires blazing, waiting for us. As we walked the group began to sing quietly – creating what was a holy atmosphere. It was incredible to watch the Moderator – Robert Smith – enter the largest teepee and to make his formal apology to the gathered elders. The atmosphere was pregnant with expectation – and sorrow.

I had never seen people cry before or since like I did that night. It seemed to me that the sorrow of the ages was poured out that night by men and women whose language and culture and families had been deeply damaged by ideas – ideas which had ultimately failed a people and a society. And yet, in the midst of that, there were also expressions of the hope of healing – and unity. As an impressionable young woman, this experience was a tremendous demonstration of the power and love of the Holy Spirit and it was formative. I remember the campfire, the dancing, the joy and the anguish, the speeches, the teepee where the apology was offered, and “joyfully received” but not accepted at that time.

And I remember that this was the place where the Church in Canada began its long walk of repentance and reparation - a walk we stay committed to; just last summer Archbishop Fred Hiltz apologized to all Indigenous Peoples for the spiritual harm caused as a result of colonialism

But most of all I remember the Spirit, for it was present. I could honestly think of no other reason for the decision we had reached after much anger and upset in our meeting. I could think of no other origin for the strength and unity of purpose and largeness of consciousness and heart that emerged out of disunity and allowed us to speak with one voice after all.

And I think it is the Spirit’s ability to come alongside us and to embolden us to transcend difference, to restore communication and unity, to breathe bravery on the fearful in the way Luke describes the day of Pentecost that helps us see how the Spirit works. That group of huddled, stressed apostles became a transformed group; this remnant of the Jesus community, who had gathered together out of shared fear and a need for mutual comfort. And after days – weeks - of making themselves scarce, the scripture tells us they were suddenly speaking boldly.

A people who had earlier been silent out of fear, were now speaking about God’s powerful works. It was a truly transformative moment when the Jesus community was itself resurrected and new life was breathed into frightened, tentative and confused people. And Peter – the same Peter who had denied Jesus and fled for fear weeks earlier was now pretty fearlessly addressing a skeptical, oppositional crowd with the confidence he’d always wanted to display.

This word “Spirit,” has a range of meanings: Spirit is about power, force, energy, life giving power. Spirit means life- giving breath. God’s Spirit – “Ruach” - whispered across the face of the waters in Creation, God breathed into the human being; it became a living person. In Ezekiel’s vision God blows upon the dry bones and they live.

And in the same way, the Holy Spirit came alongside the early Jesus community and breathed life and courage and guidance into their midst. There certainly wasn’t anything tentative about this new community.

Peter calls the mind of the crowd gathered around this extraordinary event to the prophetic nature of the situation and tells the onlookers that life as they know it is over. The reign of God has begun. Suddenly they're out talking to people they never would have before and travelling to places they never would have without God's mission in front of them.

The disciples were to continue Jesus' ministry here, on earth, without his bodily presence but with the help of the Paraclete alongside them for courage and wisdom. And they would need it.

As do we.

For we know that the Spirit whispers into our own time – into our own anxiety and uncertainty. But we know – with a certain hope – because of the first disciples experience that God works this way:

The Holy Spirit, the Helper, the Advocate, helps us to hear God's word, not our own. God has called us to be instruments of his love to each other and to all people. How we do this in our new normal remains to be discerned. But what we do know, without a shadow of a doubt is that the God who has called us, has also given us the power of the Holy Spirit to come alongside us to accomplish God's will – wherever that takes us.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.