

# Devotional Blog

Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> May

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS FOR LIFE, NOT JUST FOR PENTECOST! Well, of course, Pentecost is important, it is the birthday of the church. It is also one of the three great Jewish festivals, along with the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. Pentecost means “The Fiftieth”, as it falls 50 days after Passover- that is a week of weeks which is why it is also called the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot). This well-established Jewish feast was a celebration of the grain harvest. It is also the occasion of the anniversary of the law being given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The significance would not be lost on the first Christians, the old covenant had been characterised by the operation of the law, the new covenant would be characterised by the operation of the Spirit. The new is ushered in on the anniversary of the old. The events of that day which we read about in Acts 2:1-21 are dramatic, radical, and powerful, with an amazing universal dimension.

The thing is that we are all living in the era of the Holy Spirit, even if we don't recognise the fact. What is clearly apparent from the events in Acts 2 is that the Holy Spirit has an enormous empowering effect. Yes, even on weak people! This is a major lesson for us when we doubt ourselves. Only a few weeks before that festival Peter was denying Jesus on the night of his trial (Luke 22:54-62). Indeed, it is surprising that he was even in the upper room! And yet there he is, full of the Spirit, boldly preaching the very first Christian sermon to a bemused crowd who think that he and his friends are drunk. The stunning fact is that every believer has access to that same Spirit that was gifted to the failure known as Peter.

There is so much in the Pentecost event that underlines the universal nature of the Holy Spirit. We have a long list of countries that were represented that day. Peter tells us that God pours out his Spirit “upon all flesh”. This includes people of all ages, genders, status: all humanity. Servants and maids will have a part to play; they will prophesy. In the old era only specially chosen individuals had access to the Spirit’s power. Now that power is available to all people. The new era is open to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. Supporting this inclusiveness is the fact that the word “Spirit” can be both masculine and feminine. The Hebrew word for Spirit (and wind) is “Ruach”, which is both masculine and feminine, while the New Testament Greek word for Spirit “Pneuma” is neuter.

Given this powerful and inclusive creation of a Spirit -led church we may muse that it often does not feel like that today. Why? Well, we know that there have often been tensions between the dynamic freedom in the Spirit and the need for structure and order in the church. Paul’s first letter to the young church in Corinth was in part to provide some structure to worship. It is tempting only to see the Holy Spirit as a “gentleperson” that never forces its way in and only goes where it is are invited. But if we confine the role of the Holy Spirit to the quiet, subtle and fragile, we run the risk of domesticating the Spirit. The fact is that the Holy Spirit has been loosed into this world so that we can experience “signs and wonders”. The Holy Spirit should be at the very heart of our faith and our church life. We must never have worship, teaching, leadership, or decision making without the central role of the Holy Spirit. We need tongues of fire in our hearts and minds! Let us remind ourselves daily that the Spirit sets us free from our sins, our wrongdoing, that we cannot get rid of on our own. This is a life-long process. So, it is essential continually to talk with fellow Christians about how the Holy Spirit is guiding us, how it is empowering us with the Spirit’s gifts. When the Spirit came that Pentecost day to the first

believers who were “gathered together” it came to them as a community, as a collective. In addition to our own personal experience of the Spirit it also comes to us a church, a faith community. The relevant question becomes not just “How will I respond to the gifts of the Spirit?” but “How will we respond to these gifts?”

These gifts are given freely to believers, to empower weak people like Peter and us to deliver on God’s Mission. When we say yes to Jesus, we are given the power to spread the Gospel, not just on the Church’s birthday but for life!

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