

# *forgiveness – supreme gift of the spirit*

a sermon preached on the

*feast of pentecost*

8 June 2014

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by dr muriel porter, hon. parish reader*

Lectons: Acts 2: 1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:1-13; John 20: 19-23

We have before us today two very different accounts of the giving of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' disciples. The first, from the book of Acts, is the familiar one from Sunday school days. In this account it happened on the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples were gathered together to celebrate the Jewish festival which commemorates the giving of the Torah, the law, to the Israelites on Mount Sinai after their escape from Egypt. Pentecost – known to modern Jews as Shavuot – is celebrated 50 days after the Passover. Hence our celebration today, 50 days after Easter.

The Acts account is full of drama. There is the sudden sound “like the rush of a violent wind”, filling the entire house. And tongues like fire “rested on each of them”, we are told. So we celebrate this day with lashings of red like fire, from the vestments and altar hangings to the red socks and scarves and coats and ties we are wearing.

The drama in the Book of Acts continues, as a vast crowd gathers to see what is going on. They hear the disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in many and various languages about “God's deeds of power”. It is the very public debut of what would become the Christian Church – hence, what some have called the Church's birthday, another Sunday school favourite.

But John's Gospel offers an entirely different account, on an entirely different day. It is far gentler, and much more private. John here locates the gift of the Holy Spirit not on Pentecost, but on Easter Day. It comes straight after his account of the Risen Jesus appearing in the Garden to Mary Magdalene, and sending her to proclaim his resurrection to the disciples.

There they are, cowering with fear behind locked doors – and Jesus appears among them, offering those poor confused and frightened souls his peace, not once but twice. And without the sound effects of a mighty rushing wind, or the visual display of tongues of fire, he gently breathes the Holy Spirit on them. What a contrast!

Let's not get distracted about which version is the “right” one – which one really happened. These are not news reports! Rather, the two authors are offering us different understandings of what the gift of the Holy Spirit means for Jesus' followers – including ourselves. The Acts account offers a public display of the transformation of the disciples into energetic missionaries to the entire known world; it has a graphic cinematic quality. The Gospel story, on the other hand, quietly unites Easter and Pentecost, Resurrection and Spirit, in the lives of believers.

Let's stay with the Gospel account, this conflation of Resurrection and Holy Spirit. It harks back to Jesus' earlier promise to the disciples, that the ones who believes in him “will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works

than these”, because he is going to the Father.<sup>1</sup> And what is the work of Jesus that he gives them to do as he empowers them for mission? “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”.

If there was one thing that got Jesus regularly into trouble during his earthly ministry, it was openly forgiving sins. Who does he think he is, his detractors fumed, that he dares to forgive sins! That is for God alone, they insisted as they accused him of blasphemy.<sup>2</sup> And here, in John’s Gospel, he hands on that same power to his followers.

The authority to declare forgiveness is given to priests at their ordination, and we are the beneficiaries of that gift week by week as we receive priestly absolution in the Eucharist. Certainly, priests are seen as the heirs of the apostles gathered in the Upper Room on Easter night, hence the handing on to them of this particular commission.

But I suggest that, just as the Holy Spirit is given to us all, so we all are called and empowered to forgive sins. Not to declare forgiveness in some formal public capacity, as the clergy are, but to make forgiveness a hallmark of our lives as followers of Christ. After all, the Lord’s Prayer requires us to be forgiving people if we ourselves expect to be forgiven.

Is this perhaps the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit? Not speaking in tongues or setting the world on fire, but the gentle, loving art of forgiveness for which we desperately need the Spirit’s power in all its fullness. As St Paul tells us in the letter to the Galatians, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.<sup>3</sup> None of these “fruits”, though, can co-exist with an unforgiving heart; forgiveness, it seems to me, is the absolutely essential quality of the Spirit-filled life. And the fruits of the Spirit surely flow from it – love, joy, peace, generosity...

Forgiveness is a sure sign of the new creation inaugurated by the Resurrection, and empowered by the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The capacity to love the one who has wronged us, who holds us in contempt, is foundational to Christian community and indeed to all community.<sup>4</sup>

The prophecy from the book of Joel quoted in the Pentecost story in Acts surely speaks of this new creation, when God pours out God’s spirit upon all flesh, when sons and daughters shall prophesy, young men shall see visions, and old men shall dream dreams. This ancient vision pre-figures a world where all old hatreds and limitations, all pain, is swept away, and though we cannot see this new world in concrete reality yet, the reign of God is nevertheless already with us. That is what the Spirit empowers us to believe and to act on, as a church community, yes, but also as individual Christians. And Christ stands here among us today, gently, quietly, breathing on each of us the transforming, energising, disturbing gift of the Holy Spirit

Pentecost, in the Christian tradition, brings us to the end of Eastertime. For the past 50 days, we have continued to celebrate Easter with all the symbols and words and music associated with Easter. Later this morning, the Paschal Candle that guided our feet into the dark church before dawn on Easter Day, that has shone as the light of Christ next to the font ever since, will be moved to one side. Next Sunday, we

---

<sup>1</sup> John 14:12

<sup>2</sup> Mark 2:1-12

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 5: 22-23

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy A Lee, ‘The Canaanite Woman [Matt 15: 21-28]: Reclaiming the Voice of Scripture in Ministry’, paper delivered at the Anglican Summer School, Trinity College Theological School, 5 February 2014.

will no longer use the Easter greeting – Christ is risen, he is risen indeed – and all those exclamations of ‘alleluia’. We will have moved into the season of Sundays after Pentecost, or as it is sometimes called, ‘ordinary time’, a long season that takes us through to Advent.

But there is nothing ordinary about the risen life we will continue to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Even as we bid farewell to the Eastertide celebrations, we must not forget that Easter is always with us. Every Sunday, no matter how ‘ordinary’, is a little Easter, a little Feast of the Resurrection. And we remain God’s Easter people. As the 4<sup>th</sup> century Saint Augustine said, ‘We are an Easter people and alleluia is our song’.

Alleluia!

mporter@unimelb.edu.au