

Day of Pentecost

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By Pat Bennett

Introduction

The images we usually associate with Pentecost – fire, wind, a multitude of languages, passionate speech, perplexed crowds and accusations of early-morning drunkenness – are those we find in the book of Acts. It's all very noisy, very colourful, very energetic and very public; and while Peter makes reference to the Spirit in his speech to the crowds, its main explanatory content relates to Jesus. In contrast, the gifting of the Holy Spirit to the disciples in John's Gospel (Jn 20: 21–22) is an intimate affair, and comes with much more information, albeit rather enigmatic in places, about the Spirit's role within, and relationship to, the nascent Christian community. However, despite its lack of fireworks, this Pentecost Gospel reading contains important insights about the Holy Spirit – insights which can also help us as we think about conflict.

Preparation: Make a list of **any** words you associate with the person and work of the Holy Spirit – adjectives, nouns, verbs (they don't have to be from the Bible!) – and then categorise them in any different ways that occur to you as you study your list. Are there words which could fit into more than one category? Are there categories which seem particularly contradictory or complementary? If there are any words, tensions or resonances which particularly strike you, spend some time exploring their dimensions and possibilities.

Text

John 14:8–17, 25–27

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his

works.

Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

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“I have said these things to you while I am still with you.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Comment

There is a slightly dislocating feel to today's Gospel as we suddenly find ourselves moving from the Ascension backwards to the time prior to Jesus' death. However the passage contains important teaching on the nature and role of the Holy Spirit. While the Spirit is not infrequently mentioned in the Gospels, it is only in this final conversation between Jesus and his disciples that they (and we) are given any direct information about this mysterious Being. The previous mentions in John's Gospel are mainly in connection with Jesus' baptism and with the (cryptic and unexplained) 'new birth' he mentions to Nicodemus (Jn 3: 5-8). Across the Synoptics, the Spirit is mostly mentioned in the context of the pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary and various prophecies relating to these, and in connection with their offspring (particularly the baptism and temptation of Jesus). In other places in the Gospels the Spirit is mentioned as one whom it is sinful and

dangerous to speak against (Mt 12:32; Mk 3:29; Lk 12:10), as one involved in prophetic speaking and witnessing (Mt 10: 20; 22:43; Mk 12:36; 12:11; Lk 12:12;), and as a gift that will be given (Lk 11: 13; Jn 7:39) but no further expansion accompanies any of these instances. It is only now, in this last conversation with his disciples prior to his arrest and execution, that Jesus puts some flesh on the bones.

At the end of the preceding chapter and the beginning of this one he has been trying, in various ways but with little apparent success, to get the disciples to understand that he is going to leave him. It is against this backdrop that the Holy Spirit is introduced into the mix – as *allos parakl tos*. The term indicates two critical things which have hitherto not been disclosed about the Spirit: *parakletos* is, literally translated, ‘called to one’s side’ i.e someone who gives aid and support, hence the title ‘Advocate’ or ‘Comforter’ [1]. So the Holy Spirit is someone who will be in and amongst the community of disciples, just as Jesus has been. Furthermore, since *allos* denotes “another of the same sort” (as opposed to *heteros* which denotes “another of a different sort” i.e one which is qualitatively different) [2], the Spirit will be alongside them, in relationship with them and supporting them in exactly the same way that Jesus has been. The point is reinforced in the following verse – the advocate is already alongside them (*men* – remaining with, abiding) and will in the future be with them, wherever their place, whenever the time and whatever their state. V20 (missed out in today’s text) underlines this intimacy again – and while they may have failed to understand quite how Jesus is ‘in the Father’, or may not yet appreciate how they are ‘in Jesus’, they do have very direct and potent experiences of what it means for Jesus to be ‘in them’.

The next nugget of key information comes in v26. This helper will do two very important things while alongside and among them: give them instruction (*didask*) on what they don’t yet know, and bring to their minds (*hypomimn sk*) all that they have heard from Jesus. There is a sense here then that the kind of journey they have been on – one of gradually evolving understandings – is going to continue: the Spirit’s supporting role will not be to suddenly give them complete and comprehensive clarity of understanding or furnish them with instant solutions. Rather it will be to function as lodestar and touchstone – providing both an orientation point when they have to navigate new circumstances or deal with unknown situations, and a reliable set of bench marks against which to test new ideas and understandings as these evolve, and new actions as these are planned. This is not about simply enabling a parrot-like repetition, or an inflexible top-down imposition of rigid ‘rules’, but of facilitating the maturing of understandings and, as the new community grows and spreads, of enabling the transposition of core principles of the Kingdom into new situations in life-giving ways.

A final important aspect is the very communal feel of this moment. There is sometimes a tendency to think of the work of the Holy Spirit in the primarily personal terms and often *extra*-ordinary activity we see in the Gospels, and it is clear from both these stories and from those in Acts that the Spirit does indeed work in specific (and often striking) ways in individuals at particular moments. However John’s account reminds us that the Spirit is also someone who is vitally involved in the very fabric of the Christian community as one who helps it remember and hold to the core understandings and principles of Jesus’ instruction, and work out and apply how these should direct thought and action in each new circumstance encountered – the warp and the weft of the Kingdom as it is woven by our living. This is something which we also see happening in the Acts of the Apostles and across their Epistles – sometimes very successfully, sometimes less so (just as with us!) The fact that Jesus chooses this dimension to highlight, and as the one with which to comfort and encourage the disciples in his last hours with them, underscores its importance.

[1] W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol. I, p.208

[2] W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol. I, p.60

Response

Although it may sometimes be the case, conflicts are rarely solved by one individual acting alone, no matter how charismatic the person or daring the action. Most conflicts are embedded in some way in the communities within or between which they arise – in their histories, narratives, hierarchies, politics, privileges, power imbalances, relational connections etc. So the pursuit of better understandings and possible solutions needs to likewise be done in and by the communities involved. The pattern offered by John's account of how the Holy Spirit works within the Christian community suggests some points for further reflection on this.

Make a list of different communities of which you are a member – family, friends, work, church, political etc. Choose one or two – perhaps one where you feel deeply embedded, or one where there is a high likelihood or a strong past history of conflict – and then consider any or all of the following with respect to these communities.

- What are the core principles, values or things of key importance at the heart of this community? Would the group still survive or function without them? Have they always been the same or have they changed over time? To what extent are they negotiable or non-negotiable? Have they ever been a source of conflict within the group? If so, how was this resolved?
- How does this group react when it encounters new or difficult situations? Or when it comes into conflict with another community? Does it have coherent ways of reflecting on such events in the light of its core values and of considering how these ought to be applied or further developed in such circumstances?
- Who are the people in the group who are good at managing these sorts of situations and what can be learnt from them? Are there things we could or should be doing as a community to develop skills which will help us deal with new situations, especially ones in which conflict might arise?

Prayer

Holy Spirit,
the great gift of Love –
wherever the place,
whenever the time,
whatever the circumstance,
remind us always
of that which is at the heart of the Kingdom
and teach us
how to live into it
with faithful creativity
Amen

Further Reading

Tuesday this week (31/05/22) is the Feast of the Visitation, when we mark the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth which gives rise to the Magnificat. You can find a new reflection for this (with links to a short art-video podcast and accompanying liturgy) [here](#).

Season: Pentecost

Themes: Conflict Skills