

Pentecost Sunday Year B , 2009
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15.

Spirit of Power

Rev'd Robyn Boyd, 31st May, 2009

On the day of Pentecost, that ancient Hebrew feast day celebrating both harvest and the giving of the law to Moses at Sinai, Jesus' followers are gathered in their upper room in Jerusalem, waiting. Before he ascended to God, Jesus had told them to wait for the promise of the Father: "*John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now*" (v5). And they knew his earlier promise that he would not leave them alone. So there they are, wondering. Would it be like Moses, encountering God on Mt Sinai, with thunder and lightning and cloud and smoke; or like Elijah, on that same mountain, encountering God as the still small voice, the quiet whisper, the brush of gentle breeze passing him by? They'd seen the power of God at work in Jesus, his healings and miracles; indeed, his very resurrection. All of this they had experienced and encountered as new works of the power of God amongst them. So here they were, waiting; waiting for God only knew what; holding in their minds Jesus' parting words to them: "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.*"(v8)

And the Holy Spirit does come... an experience described as like the rush of a violent wind and tongues of flame. And under the influence of this Spirit, they proclaim the wonder of God in other tongues. Visitors in Jerusalem for the festival hear God praised in their own native languages! "*All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'*" (v 12)

What indeed *does this mean?* For them and for us?

For them, there could well have been a lot of associations with Hebrew Scripture and tradition running through their heads. The words of the prophet Joel are recalled: "*In those days I will pour out my spirit and they shall prophesy.*" (Acts 2.18b; Joel 2.29). And they were perhaps remembering the tradition that the Law had initially been broadcast with a stream of fire from heaven, in the seventy languages of the nations of the world at that time. Perhaps, too, they saw this as a reversal of curse of the Tower of Babel.

And for us? What can we make of this *power* of the Holy Spirit? On Ascension night, the Archbishop reminded us of the power of God at work in us, picking up on the Ephesians text for Ascension... "*the immeasurable greatness of Christ's power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*" (Eph 1:19)

It so often seems for us that the Spirit is lodged in our psyche as a benign, abiding helper: something wholesome and acceptable, like we hear in today's Gospel, where Jesus talks about the Advocate and the Spirit of truth, as guiding us, glorifying God, proving the world wrong about sin and righteousness. But this Spirit of power, bursting in on the disciples, spilling over into the streets – that can seem like another thing altogether, making many wary about opening the door to this in our lives.

This Spirit of sweeping power historically has often been kept at a distance, in the realms of theory, with an aura of mystery and unknowing, an “it”, impersonal, depersonalised, with descriptions like the one I heard not so long ago.. “*a stream of love*”. Some in the Church relegate the New Testament stories of the power of the spirit to being merely colourful stories of metaphor and exaggeration, and if at all real, then something belonging only to the early Church – a necessary impetus to kick off the Church, not needed or with any relevance and impact for us now. And also discounted are the other stories of healings, speaking in ecstatic tongues and the other miracles and spiritual gifts recorded in Acts and about which St Paul teaches and affirms.

So, for many of us here, the experience of Pentecost and the power of the Spirit may well have been watered down and sanitised. The Spirit simply stays as the thing we don’t often talk about, the thing that’s safer to keep contained; a construct of our minds, or something that at most is quietly within us, rather than a person of the Triune God, active in her own right, and known to work with power. Those who do talk about really being aware of the Spirit in their lives can be viewed with some suspicion. To talk about experiences of the Spirit’s power in one’s life, whether it’s tongues or some other spiritual gift, or just experiences of God that don’t fit rational and tidy explanation, might mean being listened to, politely, but most probably one is labelled as a bit loopy, over-emotional, un-Anglican –maybe “got at” by “those Pentecostals”.

I have a sense that where there’s wariness about this Spirit of power, it’s more because of the fear that our Christian lives and journeys might get out of our control, and out of the control of the institution of the Church. And I think it’s time we came out of the closet with our experiences of the Spirit in our lives. Encourage each other.

In my earlier years, as a young university student, I was incensed by what I thought of as the arrogance and great irrationality of Christians. I loathed them and I ridiculed them and argued against them. I believed that all religious belief was ideology, merely sets of ideas and values –good and bad. I believed it was a lie to take ideas and construct a fictitious God around them to justify beliefs and actions. I was a hard core agnostic, very humanist. Couldn’t people see that God was a fragment of imagination, an intellectual construct, a fuzzy set of values? I could not believe in such a thing as a God who was “other”, existing in reality; certainly not a loving, personal, creator God. Yet this was the God I finally encountered, who broke into my life with power only a few years later, out of the blue, like Saul on the road to Damascus. The spirit of God moving me from sceptical disbelief to that absolute knowing and conviction of faith and a new life that goes beyond what the world values as rational understanding. This is the sort of power of the Spirit we’re confronted with at Pentecost: the impossible made possible, for the glory of God.

What then, about the power of this Spirit we meet now at Pentecost? She’s there at every twist and turn in the Scriptures. The Hebrew *ruach*, the Greek *pneuma* –both feminine nouns, both carrying the dual meaning of wind, breath, spirit. Associated with new life, with creative power, never an empowering for our own feel-good benefit, but always empowering the people of God –the Church, the body of Christ, to proclaim the name of the Lord, to be his witnesses.

We meet the Spirit at creation – the breath of God sweeping over the face of the waters, creating life and light.

We meet her in that wonderful story from Ezekiel - the dry bones, empty and lifeless. For Israel in exile, a prophetic promise that life resumes in the midst of death; that those dead, dry bones can be filled with the breath of God.

We meet the Spirit in Jesus' life; we see her descending on Jesus at his baptism; baptised with water and the holy Spirit, we rise with him to new life given by the Spirit in our baptisms.

We hear Jesus' words about the Spirit he will leave to abide with his followers in all times – the gentle but empowering, abiding, continuing presence of God with us, Spirit of truth, advocate; enabling, comforting.

We read St Luke's descriptions of the Spirit at work in the early church, and we hear St Paul, time and again, talk of God's power at work in us; talk of the freedom that comes with the Spirit of the Lord (*2 Cor 3:17*), always pointing to God, always revealing Christ, always the means of the proclamation of Christ's life and death and resurrection that we all are called to proclaim.

To finish: Pentecost is about the Holy Spirit setting people free, setting us free, setting Christ's Church free. We who are Christ's have been gifted with his Spirit, and the invitation of Pentecost is for us to set the Spirit free, to allow her to work in us and through us; to allow the Spirit to breathe fresh life into any dryness and death within us or the body of Christ.

Are you willing to say "yes" to that, and to have God's Spirit break free in you? Ask, and wait.