

**Spirit**

*Numbers 11:24-40; Acts 2:1-21*

The Latin motto for the City of Edinburgh is *Nisi Dominus Frustra* - from the Old Testament Psalm 107 - *"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain."* The first disciples and followers of Jesus, rather than taking matters into their own hands, getting organized and venturing forth with banners unfurled, withdraws to different places in and around Jerusalem to wait and to pray.

The next move is up to God. It is up to the risen Jesus to make good on His promise to send the Spirit and to restore God's place in the world. In a sense this is what prayer is - the bold - even arrogant effort on the part of the church community to hold God to His promises. *"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."* This is praying that we shall receive God's Spirit, the Kingdom, power, but understanding humbly that only God can give what the Church most desperately needs.<sup>i</sup>

One writer imagines the day of Pentecost and what it might have been like: *"On the great day of Pentecost, a mighty wind surged from heaven, pushing the followers of Jesus out of the house where they had been hiding, and into the streets. Flames danced above their heads, their tongues began to wag, and people from all over the world heard what they said - no matter what their native language."*

*Peter gave a sermon which would have caused the world's greatest evangelists to turn green with envy - and three thousand people were baptised. The Church of Jesus Christ was born!<sup>ii</sup>*

On the day *after* Pentecost: people couldn't remember if the Bank Holiday was a local holiday; or who would fix the Church website; or whose turn it was to empty the dishwasher; or what bins

were due to go out this week; of if the food in a plastic bowl in the fridge was passed its sell-by-date.

Just like after Christmas and Easter, so much of the build-up in faith matters is where the excitement lies. But afterwards? A sense of exhaustion, or anti-climax, of unfulfillment.

When we look at the day of Pentecost, we are not inquiring about the truth of what actually happened. Rather we are concerned about the truth of what was claimed, what is asserted about the nature of the emerging church. We should look not so much as what we think might have happened on that day, but why it happened and what difference did it make to those first, nervous followers of Jesus. Sometimes we look at this story ,and we feel the Church is given hope. Sometimes we look at this story and feel that the Church is being judged and found wanting.

It is an ambiguous and mysterious story, as much as it is exciting and wonderful. On the dawn of the day of Pentecost Jesus' followers are gathered, possibly in the Upper Room where the Last Supper and the Easter resurrection appearances took place. They wait and pray. The new days begins with an eruption of sounds from heaven, and a mighty wind. Things are coming loose, breaking open. Is the image a mirror of the Genesis poetry of Creation and the same wind on that very first morning of all mornings swept across the dark waters, the wind of creation, the wind of Pentecost again bringing something to life?

What was first seen was what looked like tongues of fire. This image of fiery tongues expand into the tongues of the languages of the world. The first gift of the Spirit is the gift of speech, in different languages. People are helped to feel, and see, and hear God's good news for an anxious world. God's power irrupting to move things and shake things and breathe life into things. The

Spirit breathed life into the cowardly and the cautious and the doubting and the disbelieving, and something changed and shifted and has never been the same since.

How long had God been planning this? From God's Spirit blowing over a formless void, to life-giving breath to Creation, to faithless and faithful people in a Promised Land and in Exile, to the time of domination and abuse by the Roman Empire, oppression and judgement of the religious authorities, and elitism and slavery of the ruling classes.

From that day to this, the Spirit brings life out of death, and hope out of despair. Do you recognise the darkness of distress of our world? The growing gap between rich and poor; the growing manifestation of local and global poverty and unchecked disease; the growing divisions between nations and within economies, and the growing intolerance of any opinion or ideal other than our own. Into this darkness the fire-light of the Holy Spirit; into this querulous quagmire of stagnant judgementalism the blowing of the fresh and life-giving Spirit.

Events like our Umbrella Festival, and Morningside Hope concert and weekly events, and Wednesday coffee morning, and church services make us look at the Pentecost story and those first disciples and what happened to them and because of them.

Were they a fairly homogenous group of narrow representation or were they a larger group, not in the upper room but out on the street, embodying a much more diverse truth of age, gender and culture? As I welcomed hundreds to a memorial service last Friday here in Church; as we will welcome many others to Umbrella and Morningside Hope events in the days to come; as the local primary school will be gathering in their hundreds in here at the end of June for their end of term service; as we become aware of the hundreds of people who use our Church and Halls every week,

from all ages and backgrounds, might it be that the Spirit is actually already at work here, in this place? How might we help them? How might they help us?

The famous English playwright Noël Coward once said: *"You ask my advice about acting? Speak clearly, don't bump into the furniture, and if you must have motivation, think about your pay packet on Friday."* I wonder if some of what it means to be a Christian in our day is simply not bumping into God's furniture, not getting in the way of what God's Holy Spirit is doing. That doesn't mean sitting back and letting God get on with it, but it does mean that sometimes our planning, or lack of planning; our commitment, or lack of commitment - can be the very things that frustrate what God is trying to do. When God opens a door or a window, and we sense the air changing around us, don't rush for the draught-excluders to keep God's Spirit out. When God sparkles in a bright little flame when someone has a new idea, or suggests doing something differently, don't rush for the fire extinguisher and think of a dozen reasons why it could never work. When God glows around us in the water of life, don't pull the plug and let something good and cleansing drain out of the plughole of life.

Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, goes to great pains to insist at the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit is anything but interior. Everything is by wind and fire, loud talk, buzzing confusion and public debate. The Spirit is the power which enables the Church to 'go public' with its good news, to attract a crowd, and to have something so say that is worth hearing, and to do that is worth experiencing and sharing.

When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to serve, serve! When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to help, help! When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to rest, rest!

When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to give, give! When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to change, change!

When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to show love, show love!

When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to comfort, comfort.

When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to listen, listen!

When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to learn, learn!

When the Spirit of God gives you opportunity to praise, praise!

Pentecost, the day of the Spirit, red with the fire of warmth and inspiration and courage and love.

How will you work with the Spirit in the week ahead?

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> *William H Willimon, Acts, p27*

<sup>ii</sup> *Thom M Shuman, Fire and Bread, p157*