

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

THE HOLY SPIRIT Year A - Pentecost – Acts 2.1 - 21

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

² When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³ But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

Peter Addresses the Crowd

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ "In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The Generosity of the Spirit

Generosity is rooted in the divine abundance of God. The Spirit of God, so visible at Pentecost, has always been at work in the world. God's creative and restorative Holy Spirit has been at work since the dawn of creation.

St Irenaeus (c. 125 - c. 202 AD) described the Holy Spirit and the Son as the two hands of God in creation:

'It was not angels, therefore, who made us, nor who formed us, neither had angels power to make an image of God, nor any one else, except the Word of the Lord, nor any Power remotely distant from the Father of all things. For God did not stand in need of these [beings], in order to the accomplishing of what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying, Let Us make man after Our image and likeness; Genesis 1:26 He taking from Himself the substance of the creatures [formed], and the pattern of things made, and the type of all the adornments in the world'.¹

Irenaeus reminds us that from the very beginning, God creates and sustains the world by his own generous presence. God's generosity comes first: the Spirit is poured out. The world exists because God gives.

The Spirit Revealed in the New Testament

It is in the New Testament, however, that the Holy Spirit really steps onto centre stage. There the Spirit is revealed in personal ways: as 'the Spirit of your Father' (Matt. 10.20), 'the Spirit of his Son' (Gal. 4.6), 'the Spirit of Jesus' (Acts 16.7), 'the Spirit of Christ' (Rom. 8.9), 'the Spirit of life' (Rom. 8.2), 'the Spirit of sonship' (Rom. 8.15), 'the Spirit of grace' (Heb. 10.29), and 'the Paraclete' (John 14.16).²

All these titles emphasise that the Spirit is the personal presence of God with us, drawing us into the life of the Father and the Son.

Pentecost: The Spirit of Transformation

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit brings us new life - life in Christ. The account of the first Pentecost in the book of Acts is one of exceptional drama. Dramatically, and out of the blue, a supernatural energy is unleashed upon the world. The change in the disciples was so dramatic that some witnesses even thought they were drunk.

Yet this is not a show to impress. This is no less than a moment of utter transformation, the moment when the Spirit brings profound change to those who witness and receive him. There is no doubt that, for those who embraced it that day, the change was good; it was more than good; it was transformational. And my goodness, what a transformation Pentecost wrought. Not long before, the disciples had been lodging in Jerusalem, waiting, as Jesus had commanded, for the Holy Spirit to come. But then, filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples rushed out into the streets to speak and preach in the languages of the many Jews of the Diaspora. The disciples of Jesus were transformed - they were changed forever.

¹ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book IV.20.1, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103420.htm>

² Alasdair Heron, The Holy Spirit (London, Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1983)

The account in Acts is set in the distant past, yet it creates a bridge for us across time. The Spirit bridges the gap between the 'then and there and the here and now (...) Christ is not merely a memory of someone long gone, or someone who may arrive in the future, but is present here and now.'³ As Calvin writes:

'What our mind does not comprehend let faith conceive, viz., that the Spirit truly unites things separated by space'.⁴

Thus, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ lives in our hearts today.

The Holy Spirit as the Bond of Divine Love

Christian generosity is participation in God's own love. St Augustine, in the fourth century, described the Holy Spirit as the bond of unity between the Father and the Son:

'Wherefore, if Holy Scripture proclaims that God is love, and that love is of God, and works this in us that we abide in God and He in us, and that hereby we know this, because He has given us of His Spirit, then the Spirit Himself is God, who is love. Next, if there be among the gifts of God none greater than love, and there is no greater gift of God than the Holy Spirit, what follows more naturally than that He is Himself love, who is called both God and of God? And if the love by which the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, ineffably demonstrates the communion of both, what is more suitable than that He should be specially called love, who is the Spirit common to both?'⁵

In other words, the Spirit is not merely a force from God or a feeling we experience about God. The Spirit is the love of God himself - the love that eternally flows between the Father and the Son.

The significance for us is that when we receive the Holy Spirit, we no longer stand apart, distant from God's love; we receive the very same love shared between God the Father and God the Son. And incredibly, we not only share the relationship and love that Jesus has with His heavenly Father; through the Spirit, we are united with Christ and, through Christ, welcomed into the Father's heart.

Here we see that, through the Spirit, generosity is not a peripheral obligation, but a sharing in the generous love of the Trinity.

Generosity as Participation in the Life of God

It is when the Spirit is poured into our hearts that we realise generosity is not an obligation. Rather, we see the life and love of God taking shape within us, and our hearts grow generous as we are drawn into the generous love of the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is the power of the new community in Christ. Pentecost creates a new community. A Spirit-filled church is not a group of isolated individuals, but a body of believers abiding in the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 'By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are drawn into the very life of God, joined to the Son, adopted into God's family, and given the identity of children of God, such that we can share in the prayer of the Son to the Father: "Abba, Father."'⁶

³ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Wm B Eerdmans, 1991)

⁴ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Religion*, Book 4, Chapter 17, Section 10 http://www.vor.org/rbdisk/html/institutes/4_17.htm#4.17.10

⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV.19.37. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130115.htm>

⁶ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Wm B Eerdmans, 1991)

By the same power of the Spirit, we are remade as a community. We no longer live as isolated, inward-looking individuals. Instead, we learn to live in community, together reflecting the life and love of God. Christian generosity, then, is the manifestation of this shared life.

A Spirit-Filled and Generous Church

Pentecost is the generosity of God poured into the world. A Spirit-filled church is a generous church, not just one in which people get along better, but one in which strangers are welcomed, and old divisions fade away.

The gifts of the Spirit are never private. They are given so that others can hear, receive, understand, be strengthened, and be drawn closer to Christ. As Abbot Jamison writes, 'there are no private compartments on the (...) journey to everlasting life'.⁷

Generosity is emphatically not just about money. It is about time, attention, hospitality, patience, prayer, encouragement, skill, leadership, service, and forgiveness. Money matters too, but it is only one expression of a Spirit-shaped life.

A Spirit-filled church is generous because it can only overflow with the abundance of God's Spirit.

The Blessings of the Holy Spirit

Writing in the 4th Century, Saint Basil the Great described the breadth of the Spirit's blessings:

'Through the Holy Spirit comes our restoration to Paradise, our ascension to the Kingdom of heaven, our adoption as God's sons, our freedom to call God our Father, our becoming partakers of the grace of Christ, being called children of light, sharing in eternal glory, and in a word, our inheritance of the fullness of blessing, both in this world and the world to come'.⁸

If these are the blessings the Holy Spirit brings, how can we recognise his work in us? If generosity is a sign of the Spirit's presence, what does that look like in practice?

The Fruit of the Spirit in a Transformed Life

Jesus makes it very clear that to reach our potential as God intends, to be restored to paradise, we need to seek transformation; we need to do as he commands. The words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel are a warning: 'Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do as I tell you?'

We know that it is through the fruit of the Holy Spirit - 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal. 5.22-23) - that we receive the 'Spirit of Christ' and 'belong' to God (Rom. 8.9).⁹

Following in Christ's footsteps is not easy, but we can take heart because the Holy Spirit is continually at work - has always been and always will be at work - helping us resist what hardens our hearts and what diverts us from the path God has chosen for us: the path to transformation and new life.

7 A.C. Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary*. (London, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2006)

8 St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, Chapter 15, para. 36 (New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980, https://agape-biblia.org/literatura/On-the-Holy-Spirit_Basil-the-Great.pdf)

9 'But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him'. (Rom. 8.9)

Signs of the Spirit: The Gift of Tears

How might we know that the Holy Spirit is at work in us? St Isaac the Syrian offers us answer worth noting. He taught that, as we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we may receive the 'gift of tears':

'Question: What are the exact tokens and accurate signs that the fruit which is hidden in the soul has begun to appear from a man's labor? (Greek: appear as a man).

Answer: When a man is deemed worthy to receive the gift of abundant tears which come over him without effort. For tears are established for the mind as a kind of boundary between what is bodily and what is spiritual and between passionateness and purity. (...) But the more a man draws near in his mind to the present world, the more tears subside. And when his mind is totally enmeshed in the world, a man is totally deprived of these tears. This is a sign that a man is completely buried in the passions'.¹⁰

St Isaac points to a deep inward sign of the Spirit at work: a gentle heart, holy sorrow, and a tenderness that marks the boundary between the worldly and the spiritual. Tears, like all the Spirit's gifts, open us to compassion and generosity.

The Generosity of God and the Hope of the Spirit

The Spirit awakens hope through the fulfilment of God's promises. As Heron points out, what Luke gives prominence to in Acts 2 is not so much the theophanies - the sounds like wind and tongues like fire - but the proof that what they are witnessing is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.' (Acts 2.17)

Peter declares that this is proof positive that it is through the risen Jesus that the gifts of the Spirit are received from the Father:

'This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.' (Acts 2.32-33)

Generosity, then, becomes a sign of hope. Douglas Migliore writes:

'If the Holy Spirit does all the things recounted in Scripture and confirmed in Christian experience, unites us with the Christ, pours the love of God into our hearts, gives us new life, helps us to pray, liberates us for love of God and neighbor, makes of us one people called to serve and glorify God, gives gifts of service to all members of the community, assures us of the promises of God, and awakens in us the hope for the consummation of God's redemptive purposes. If the Holy Spirit does all these things, then the Spirit is indeed the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of life'.¹¹

Here we see that the generous work of the Spirit - uniting us to Christ, pouring God's love into our hearts, and forming us into one people - awakens and sustains our hope.

¹⁰ St Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 37.

<https://cdn.subsplash.com/documents/9XTSHD/source/adfa0743-1e31-4430-9669-b506c79906fa/document.pdf>, page 140

¹¹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Wm B Eerdmans, 1991)

Living the Generous Life of the Spirit

We may recognise the Spirit at work in us through 'the gift of tears'. We may also look for the Spirit in his works, in the building up of a generous community, and the fulfilment of God's promises.

Rowan Williams gathers together these strands completely:

'Once we know that God is 'for us', we open up to the gift that God wants to give us - which is a share in his own love and freedom and mercy. We breathe with his breath - that's part of what it means to say that we receive God's 'Spirit', which makes us live like Jesus 'in tune' with God. If we have really taken the message in, we shall live lives of selfless generosity, always asking how the gifts given us - material or imaginative or spiritual or whatever - can be shared in a way that brings other people more fully alive. And we shall be able to trust the generosity of others and be free to receive what they have to give us.

Generosity, gratitude, confidence that when we fail we are still loved - all of this focused on Jesus' life and death and resurrection. That's where we start in the lifelong job of being a Christian.

To live by the Spirit, then, is to share in the generous love of the Trinity. As we are drawn into that love, our lives, our communities, and our hope are reshaped into generosity - for the glory of God and the life of the world'.¹²

¹² Quotation from the Archbishop of Canterbury's website, link now broken ([see Winchester diocese website](#))