

Pentecost Sunday
The Holy Spirit for Today
Acts 2:1-13

“Wherever one looks in the church today, there is an evident need for a deeper work of the Holy Spirit.” Those prophetic words written some forty years ago by John Stott are even more pressing today. The church in the West is tolerated but hardly embraced by a society which is pluralist and permissive. The church in the majority world is growing rapidly but, more often than not, it is marred by shallow teaching and factions not to mention the cult of personality and the so-called ‘health and wealth’ gospel which by-passes the cross and flatters only to deceive.

So the question “Who is the Holy Spirit for us today’ needs an urgent answer. The outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was dramatic and dynamic. However, we must not be pre-occupied with outward phenomena and lose sight of the inner work of the Spirit transforming the Apostles from a beleaguered minority into a missionary movement which literally changed the known world in thirty years. We need to remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit is a person, not simply an influence or force. Moreover, as one speaks about the Spirit, he may well be grieved by what we say and do. Indeed, there is something disrespectful and impolite, when we talk to someone about someone else when that person is present but we never directly address the person we’re talking about even though they are present. This should give one pause when we talk about the Holy Spirit!

Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus compares the effect of the Spirit to that of the wind which “blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). For Lydia the Spirit came as a breeze that gently opened her heart to Christ (Acts 16:14b). For Paul the Spirit came as a gale that threw him from his high horse (Acts 9:4). This suggests the need for humility before the mysterious presence and power of God. We need to remind ourselves that a mystery is not a jigsaw puzzle or detective novel requiring pieces and clues to complete the picture or catch the culprit. Neither is it a riddle requiring lateral thinking and insight to solve. Nor is it a problem like some maths equation requiring brains and patience to solve.

Mystery requires a teachable spirit rather than presumption as if I know it all and there’s nothing more to learn or experience. As JI Packer reminds us, “We can never understand God fully, just because he is infinite and we are finite”. Indeed when Moses requested to see God’s glory he had to be content with hiding in the cleft of a rock as the afterglow of God’s majesty and glory passed by (Exodus 33:12 ff). Isaiah reminds us “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than yours and my thoughts than your thoughts’”. (Isa 55:8,9)

The Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us, like a floodlight shining on the central character on stage. He is the self-effacing person of the Trinity who focuses our attention on Jesus and not himself. The means he uses is Scripture. We cannot separate the Spirit from Scripture lest we get mysticism or mindless enthusiasm on the one hand or dead orthodoxy or arid rationalism on the other.

At first glance Pentecost and subsequent events in the book of Acts suggest a two-fold work of the Holy Spirit viz i. The evangelist Philip and Peter and John in Samaria (Acts 8). ii. Cornelius and the Gentile converts in Caesarea (Acts 10). iii. Some twelve disciples in Ephesus who, having received John’s baptism of repentance, subsequently received the Spirit (Heb 19:1-7). However, closer inspection reveals the narrative nature of Acts describing the transition from the Old Covenant to the New. Not everything descriptive is necessarily prescriptive, 2 Timothy 3:16 notwithstanding. The letters of Paul give a clearer understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit viz one baptism by way of the new birth followed by our need for the Spirit to fill us daily.

The Holy Spirit respects our personalities and temperament. He will never violate them, rather enhance them. We do not have to hanker after someone else’s experience or spirituality since God does not create clones. Each of us has unique gifts and ability and we can rest easy in the assurance that God does not make mistakes and he completes what he begins.

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