

Come, Holy Spirit!

A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 5 June 2022, by David Gill.

Readings for the Day of Pentecost were Acts 2:1-21 and St John 14:8-17, 25-27

The day of Pentecost! The Holy Spirit is known. And the church lives.

Today we mark what was, as the Acts of the Apostles tells it, a very special day of great joy. Just weeks or even days before, Jesus had been executed. His followers were still trying to make sense of it all, still struggling to find their way forward.

As Acts tells it, that small Christian community found itself caught up in a major public event. You see, Pentecost was an important Jewish festival. It took place fifty days after Passover – hence “Pentecost”, from the Greek word for fiftieth. Part harvest festival, part a commemoration of Moses receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai, Pentecost was a time of gathering, remembering, celebrating.

In the midst of the festival, something life-giving happened to those first Christians. Just what happened is hard to say, because the record we have is all dressed up with drama and symbolism. But at the heart of it was their amazed discovery of the empowering, uniting, life-giving Spirit of God – in their midst!

The story from Acts sounds like the script for a Hollywood blockbuster: noises in the heavens, tongues of fire touching everyone present, a crowd gathering, excitement spreading, all of them bursting into a babel of languages to talk about what God was doing, the amazed question: what does this mean? Then an excited sermon from Peter, and the baptism of about three thousand people.

So something decisive happened. Just what we cannot say. Even when it happened is a bit unclear too.

Acts locates the gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. John’s gospel says the Spirit was given by the risen Lord on the day of his rising. But let’s not worry about such details. What matters is what these stories are saying to us.

The Pentecost stories were important then, and they’re important now, because they suggest the church didn’t just have a memory of events that are past. It has something far more wonderful: a divine presence, no less. Those early Christians discovered that the God they had glimpsed in Jesus was with them in a new way, breathing life into his people, breaking down their divisions, guiding them in the way they should go.

And – here is the point -- the God we have glimpsed in Jesus is with *us* in the same way. Wow! Good news indeed!

Yet, strangely, this is a discovery Christians keep forgetting. Belief in the Holy Spirit is affirmed by all the churches. But it is almost as universally denied by the way they sometimes behave. The doctrine is usually correct. The practice is where, again and again, our churches fall short.

An example. In 1991, Australia hosted the seventh assembly of the World Council of Churches. Its theme was “Come Holy Spirit”. Sounds good! The theme promised much. But when it was all over, the Anglican Archbishop of Hong Kong made a telling criticism. People

seemed so engrossed in their own agendas, so preoccupied with their own interests, he said, that we did not seem serious about seeking the Spirit's lead. A fair comment, I think. One that applies to many gatherings of most churches.

It is so easy to forget that the church derives its life and direction from God, not us.

Watch the lobbying when important leaders have to be chosen. Observe the politicking when controversial policies are being determined. There are even reports -- from another denomination -- of factions being organized and how-to-vote cards circulated. It sounds more like parliament than Pentecost!

The Uniting Church, to be fair, is trying hard: making major decisions by consensus rather than majority vote, seeking the mind of Christ rather than hitting people over the head with the book of regulations.

We can say the right words about the Holy Spirit when we repeat the creeds. But it is so easy for us to become practical heretics. Even at the best of times. And right now, for the churches of Australia at any rate, is not the best of times.

You know the difficulties. I won't spell them out. When times are tough, the church reaches out for solutions. That's natural. But sometimes we reach for phony solutions.

There's the lure of *novelty*. Protestants, more than our Orthodox, Catholic or Anglican friends, too easily assume that innovation is the key to spiritual renewal. If something is new it must be good. If it's old, scrap it. Embrace Hillsong, forget plainsong! But life isn't that simple. Nor is faith. Renewal that is truly of God entails a return to the sources of life, not their replacement with whatever happens to be the fad of the day.

There's the lure of better *management*. Gerald Kennedy, a Methodist bishop in the United States, once commented that "the United Methodist Church is so well organized that it will flourish in the USA long after Christianity has ceased to exist!" True, the church is an organization. It needs to be managed and managed well. But heaven help us if we think more streamlined systems are going to save us.

There's the lure of *accommodation*, of trimming the church's message to offer what Australia today seems to want. Go light on worship and doctrine, play up instead the fellowship and social service. But that track has no integrity for the church, and I think misunderstands humanity's deepest needs.

Where are we to turn for the renewal the church today so desperately needs? If I had the answer to that I'd run for Pope, but here are five things to ponder with care.

First, *God never abandons his church*. Oh yes, the long centuries past have brought tough times aplenty, many a lot tougher than this one. During those times Christians have experienced Pentecost not just once but repeatedly. Remember those experiences of spiritual empowerment and renewal: the great monastic movements of the early centuries and the middle ages, the movements of renaissance and reform in the western church, the Wesleyan revival, the Catholic renewal symbolised by Vatican II and now by Francis, the

ecumenical movement of which we are part. That selection just scratches the surface. For some strange reason, it seems, God never gives up on us.

Second, renewal that is truly of God is *always Jesus-shaped*. Be wary of any uncaring spirituality, any gospel that promises prosperity, any scheme that would have us promoting distrust or division. The way of Christ is always the way of love. And along that way there is always a cross.

Third, Pentecost is about *the renewal of a community*, not a bunch of individuals enjoying their I-me-my private spiritual experiences. Acts says “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit”. That’s “all,” not “each”. Together, they experienced the mighty wind, the shift in direction from fear to confidence. Together, beyond their linguistic and other differences, they were enabled to share the gospel. Together, they became church.

Fourth, authentic renewal *always surprises*. We may appoint planning committees by the bus load. We may redraft our mission statements until the office printers run dry. We may devise the most impressive programs, convinced beyond doubt that we’ve nailed exactly what is needed. But God’s ways are not our ways. Be prepared to be surprised, be very surprised!

Fifth, renewal that is of God is exactly that – *a gift*, something that comes from beyond ourselves. We may yearn for renewal. We may pray for it. We may clear away obstacles to it. We may receive and celebrate it. But we never create it. One of the practices I’ve learned from charismatic and Pentecostal friends is the gesture of the open hands. The symbol of confidence, need, trust. And utter dependence.

God never abandons his church. Authentic renewal is Jesus-shaped, it is communal, it surprises, and always it comes as a gift.

In that faith, on this day of Pentecost, let us open our hands and pray with our brothers and sisters across the world ...

*Come, Holy Spirit! Renew the life of your church. And kindle within us the fire of your love.
Amen*

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