

The Christian Community Finds its Voice

Rev Allan Smith 2005

This is the second in a series of two sermons that are intended to enlarge upon our understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus, and in the experience of the Christian Community

Two Old Testament prophetic expectations are relevant:

1 The hope of a Spirit filled leader with the power of God permanently upon him. (Isaiah 9 : 6 - 7, 11 : 1 - 5, Isaiah 42 : 1 - 4, 6 - 7, Micah 5 : 2 & 4)

2 The hope of a Spirit motivated and empowered community. (Ezekiel 36 : 25 - 28, Joel 2 : 28 - 29, Jeremiah 31 : 31 - 34)

God visualises a community of consecrated individuals

To speak of Christian commitment in terms of discipleship and Servanthood would seem to be an oxymoron; a contradiction in terms, within the current cultural stress on self fulfilment and self attainment as a prime goal of human endeavour.

Within the self-centred ethos of contemporary society, the words of Jesus: "*You did not choose me; I have chosen you - to go and be fruitful, bearing fruit that has lasting value...*" (John 15 : 16) and: "*Whoever wants to save his own life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it..*" (Matthew 16 : 25), may help towards understanding the Christian response to an Old Testament prophetic expectation - The hope of a dedicated community consistently guided and motivated by God's Holy Spirit.

Today's bible readings provide a grounding for this hopes:

Ezekiel 36 : 25 - 28, John 14 : 15 - 17, 1 : 26 - 27, 16 : 13 - 15, 20 : 19 - 22, Acts 2 : 1 - 8, 12 - 21

Writing to the Corinthian congregation during a period of dissention over leadership expectations, Paul in frustration declares: "The Kingdom of God does not consist of talk - but living by God's power..." We Presbyterians would do well to ponder this! Holding meetings, discussing programmes, defining doctrine, outlining leadership expectations, all comfortable in-house activity - but how much spills out from the front door of the church to whet the appetite of non Christians toward following a Christian lifestyle?

Our talk often seems ineffective, without power to win friends and influence people. Endless discussion does not achieve the goal of God... which is not for churches to become more churchy, but to enlarge God's kingdom; to enlarge the realm of God's influence within the community in which we live.

Dip into the book of Acts and you discover 'Followers of the Way', as the first Christians were called, attracting attention to their message in spectacular way confronting exploitation of the underprivileged; promoting harmony in racial tension and healing various anxieties. The encounters weren't necessarily comfortable and incident free - but they did achieve results!

These early Christian believers lived distinctively because they believed the Spirit of God - the Spirit who motivated Jesus - was alive and active in them and among them.

It is regrettable that talk of the Holy Spirit makes many within traditional churches feel on edge and fearful, recalling TV images of excessive emotionalism and dramatic expressions of worship alien to their own experience. Stress on gifts of the Spirit, without enquiring about the scriptural understanding about the purpose and use of these God inspired abilities, make some people shrink from what they see as exhibitionism. And mention of being 'filled by the Spirit' creates fear of a personality takeover;

an uncontrollable zapping rather than perceiving being 'filled with the Spirit' as having increasing confidence that when you step out in faith to convey the grace of God to others - the undergirding of God's power can be trusted to achieve a positive outcome.

These hesitations are exacerbated for we of an older generation because forty to fifty years ago there was little teaching from the pulpit about the role of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life and seldom mention of need for personal commitment to faith in Jesus. Baptism and Confirmation were presumed to be a 'Warrant of Fitness' for faith. Consequently many sincere Christians have remained primarily Church-centred, never seriously exploring what Jesus may have meant by flavouring society with the salt of love, or lighting beacons of justice enabling peaceful community co-existence (Matthew 5 : 13)

The SOURCE of this power

I think we are well aware that we cannot consistently live a Christian lifestyle under our own steam. We need a resolve stronger than our own. If there is no 'fire in the belly' of a congregation to proclaim Jesus as Lord of life the first question of the Elders needs to be: Who do you understand the Holy Spirit to be... and, what are you discovering is the particular task the Spirit is guiding us to engage in to enlarge the realm of God in this community?

In understanding 'how' the Holy Spirit does engage with congregations, the book of Acts of the Apostles - more appropriately named ; The Acts of the Holy Spirit among the Apostles - becomes a valuable textbook.

If you want a quick biblically sympathetic description of the Spirit think of the Spirit as 'God in action'. Classical Christianity has always perceived God's lively presence as personal. Not an abstract force but an influential presence; a 'He' and hopefully 'She'; not an 'It!'

'Receive the Holy Spirit'

That you and I, followers of the 'Jesus Way' in this century are intended to receive the promise of God's energising Spirit is clearly attested in John's Gospel, where it is reinforced by imagery from Genesis 2 (where God 'breathes' life into humans), and is re-enacted by Jesus breathing on his friends and saying: "*Receive the Holy Spirit..*"

So let's delve deeper - the discipleship group never anticipated Jesus would transcend death but gradually they came to a conviction that the Jesus they had known in life was somehow profoundly alive with them, and always would be. They frequently gathered praying and praising God. It was within the group dynamic of this unified fellowship, some 120 gathered to celebrate the Jewish Harvest Festival, that they were catapulted out of their comfort zone "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak as the Spirit enabled them.." Dramatic stuff beyond our experience until you realise that wind and flame are Old Testament pictorial symbols of God's presence.

What is this symbolism suggesting? What human experience is being described? These followers of Jesus were conscious of being embraced by a power beyond themselves. It was exhilarating. As if a gust of mountain air had swept in filling them with a certainty of God's reality, blowing away any remaining doubts about Jesus being God's chosen one. They experienced that peculiar hot spine tingling sensation; as if flames danced among them, burning away fear and hesitancy; setting them alight with enthusiasm. They couldn't stop praising God; bubbling over with joy.

In the power of this new found confidence they went out speaking of spiritual things with such clarity and conviction that all who heard were amazed: "These who are talking about God in this way are ordinary people like ourselves! What does this mean?" "It means..." says Peter, the guy who six weeks previously - out of fear - vehemently denied ever knowing Jesus; "it simply means God has kept God's word! What the prophet Joel predicted centuries ago has happened. God said in days to come I will pour out my Spirit on all my people, old and young, men and women shall proclaim my message - and whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved...." (Joel 2 : 28 - 29)

The miracle of Pentecost is not that the church received a display of heavenly fireworks; the miracle of Pentecost is that the Church was given a voice: something significant to say and a powerful incentive to say it. Those believers felt themselves commissioned to go out and speak of Jesus and act for Jesus eloquently demonstrating the truth of 1 Corinthians 4 : 20 'The Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power...'

Listen to a prayer request recorded in Acts 4 : 23, and its outcome : Now, Lord enable your servants to speak with boldness and act to heal in the name of Jesus....after they had prayed, they were filled by the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly..' Previously hesitant people now confidently spoke of what they knew to be true in their own experience and went on doing the things Jesus did within their own cultural settings; meeting opportunities to heal and foster reconciliation to enable wholesome human relations to happen. Their infectious enthusiasm attracted attention.

Surely the impulse to speak of what Christ is currently doing in our lives is not beyond us. I am sure most of you will have experienced the wind of God; a compulsion to loosen your inhibitions and move in directions that more truly express the faith you profess. And you will have known times when you have been set alight with enthusiasm and spoken of what is important. How our faith under girds our living and enriched relationships or overcome fears of what the future may hold. Our vocation to witness to Christ Jesus is rooted in the experience of Baptism and Confirmation when prayer was made over you for the Holy Spirit to reside in you.

If we do believe the indwelling Holy Spirit is present within our personality then what may be needed is prayer for a release of the Spirit to become the guiding and energising motivation of our faith. Delores Winder, a Presbyterian evangelist expressed it well when she said the Holy Spirit may be residing in the guest room of our hearts waiting for an invitation to come out of the guest room and join us in the dining and living rooms of our daily routine.