

GOD'S SPIRIT ON US

MAY 11, 2008

Today we have a double celebration in the life of the church. It is Pentecost Sunday and it is also Mother's Day in Canada. Surely we might think these two things have little in common but is that really so?

Pentecost is the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit on earth. Jesus had promised when he left and ascended into heaven that he would send his Spirit to each of the followers. This spirit, we have come to call the Holy Spirit, was to be the final proof we would receive of God's loving and unfolding plan for his people.

You remember how the disciples and the men and women who followed Christ were so elated by the resurrection of Christ and overjoyed by his subsequent appearances to them as he taught them what they must now do.

Only when I leave you can the Holy Spirit come upon you, said Jesus. Fear not that I am leaving this earth. God will send you his Holy Spirit to infuse you and give you courage to do what you will need to do for me as you go and teach all nations about what you have seen and experienced.

Let us look for a moment of what the Holy Spirit did to these people. They went from a group of worried, often frightened people to a people embolden enough to face the ridicule and the taunts of others to try to bring people to Christ. They were filled with a spirit which could be seen by others. They spoke openly about their faith. People were amazed that these ordinary people were so willing to risk all in order to speak about that which they had experienced and knew to be true.

The Pentecost experience according to the Book of Acts of the Apostles transcended language and cultural differences. People from across the known world experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit. They spoke so many different languages. As a result, people who heard the news from these spirit filled men and women were amazed that they could understand what was being said for people spoke in their language of origin. This was an early manifestation that God's Spirit was for all people.

You recall that Jesus spoke of the necessity to go out and preach and teach across the world to all people. This message and the gift of the Holy Spirit burst across all differences including citizenship, gender and social status.

God is not only the Creator of all that is and will be, He also is the giver of the Holy Spirit freely offered to all who believe. My son Jesus died for all men and women. I am your God and I exclude no one because of whom they are or where they live.

The Holy Spirit has often been called the great comforter. The presence of this spirit assures us of God's love and everlasting interest in us. We can say with St. Paul: "If God be for us, who can be against us."

Courage is a feature of the faith we have embraced. Courage is a basic virtue. We must have it as our foundation, a sign of our faith in God's actions for us. Truth, faith, patience and endurance are all built on courage. It takes courage to be truthful; it takes courage to be faithful; it takes courage to be patient; it takes courage to endure.

Courage is a Christian virtue. Jesus had the steady courage to suffer and yet go forward into danger, even facing an unpleasant and undeserved death. Paul was hounded, defamed, imprisoned and beaten – he never gave up his determination to go forward anyway.

Courage is a required virtue of a Christian. Christianity has lost many of its battles, not in conflict but in default by a lack of courage on the part of believers. We have denied our Master by fleeing the field. Martin Niemoller, who so bravely fought the Nazi regime in Germany, made this confession:

“In 1933, when the Communists were imprisoned, I did not lift my voice. I did not say to my congregation, “Be on your guard. There is something wrong happening here.” And when the feeble-minded were murdered, I said to myself, “Am I to be the guardian of the feeble minded?” I could not even claim that I was ignorant of the persecution of the Jews, but I did nothing. I only started speaking out when the faith of the Church was persecuted. For this neglect, I am greatly to blame. I have sinned.” (Quotation from Expository Times, LX, 228)

This courage is needed by individuals and also the church. The Holy Spirit gives us courage, it sustains us and causes us to be more than we believed we could be. With the Holy Spirit we become new people, filled with the certainty of God's love, forced because we can do no other to witness to Christ through our life and through our actions and through our words. The phrase “to be born again” comes from this sense of wonder we experience when the reality of what God through Christ has done for us and how we are valued by the God who is all powerful yet all loving dawns on us.

The Spirit of God is not new. The Spirit of God inhabiting the Israelites of the Old Testament had many manifestations. I will quickly outline some of these manifestations to people of faith. This Spirit of God was never expected to be available to all Jews let alone all the people of the earth.

- Israel saw their superheroes as possessed of the spirit of God – Samson's extraordinary strength, David against Goliath as two examples
- The Spirit of God inspiring their rulers – wisdom of King Solomon, King David's writings of song and psalms
- Transfer of the Spirit from one leader to another – Moses to Joshua, the prophet Elijah to the prophet Elisha

- Inspiring the prophets – these words from Micah 3: 5
I am filled with the power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.
- Prophets were anointed by God and given his Spirit and power
- As a sign of sanctification and judgment – phenomenon of ecstasy and cleanliness in holy people
Psalm 51: 10-11 “Create in me a clean heart, O God and put a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy spirit from me”.
- As the presence of God with Israel – sense of need for cleansing from time to time (the temple, etc)
- As a continuous prayer for God’s spirit which would make all things understandable and finally clear to the faithful
- The Spirit was seen to be a work, a gift of God but not God himself present within the spirit

In the New Testament, this spirit of God is seen much like the Old Testament view. However, it begins to change and evolve.

- John the Baptist baptizes Jesus and the Spirit of God falls on Jesus and God declares Jesus his son. This outpouring of God’s spirit on Jesus was a sign of sonship as it was to be later seen when Christians received the Holy Spirit as sons and daughters of God
- In Acts, Luke tells how Jesus up to the time of his ascension speaks of the coming of this Spirit of God on **all** who will believe
- We read stories of Stephen, Paul, Peter and others who are spirit possessed – they were inspiring evangelists – the spirit of God was seen through their words and their life witness
- In the New Testament, the one Spirit is the ground of the church’s unity as the one body of Christ in which all worldly or fleshly divisions are transcended.
- The possession of the Spirit by a believer was seen as a guarantee and first installment of the total redemption which is to be entered into hereafter. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the ground of Christian hope.
- By his or her possession of the Spirit the believer is marked out as God’s property, bearing the seal of redemption.
- The supreme manifestation of the working of the Spirit is love. Through the gift of the Spirit, God’s love is outpoured in the hearts of Christians; and it is the source of the love which binds the Christian body together.

The key difference between the Old and New Testament views of God’s Spirit is the availability of the Spirit to all believers, not just a few special people.

As we can see, one could speak for weeks on the Spirit of God. For today, we will acknowledge the great gift of God and pray that his Spirit will live always within us.

We remember this great act of kindness in this gift from God to his people wherever they may be and whoever they may be. Today we also celebrate Christian Family Sunday, a variation of the old Mother's Day. Whatever the name, this celebration speaks to the power of unconditional love from whatever source we receive it. Most mothers are in this category. Through the travails of labour, after nine months of incubation, they gave us birth. For the next 18-20 years, mothers nurture, feed, clothe, discipline, encourage and help shape our sense of security and love. There is a spirit in mothers that pours over us and provides us the freedom to grow and experience within the safety of the family. This spirit is not unlike the manifestations of God's spirit.

The Spirit of God is not always easy to explain to one who has not felt it for themselves. Start with thinking of where you have experienced love, acceptance, encouragement, forgiveness and peace. Where have you felt well about yourself, where have you been able to celebrate the gifts you have been given? Then think larger about God.

God created us, not out of some perverse sense of manipulation, but out of love and the excitement of being in relation to what and who he had created. Like a good parent, he watched our development, encouraged us along the way and walked beside us even when we did not know he was there.

His spirit of goodness and forgiveness gave us the courage to strike out and try things which appeared to be bigger than we could manage. His spirit filled us and we felt whole.

When we speak of receiving the Holy Spirit, we should not assume it is a one time only occurrence. Certainly, we can say what the Spirit has meant to us and how it has influenced our life in every way. Some can name the time when they received the Holy Spirit. Others have always known it to be present and have acknowledged it in their lives.

The key point is that God so loved the world that he gave his only son to show us the way to forgiveness and new relationship with God the Creator. God has sealed this love with the gift of his Spirit.

We are a spirit led people. This fact alone should fill us with joy and thanksgiving and cause us to dedicate our lives to God in service in all we do and say.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia!

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