

The Holy Spirit Comes

There's a story of an African American from the Deep South of America, who was driving all the way to a conference in New England, and he found himself on Sunday morning driving through rural Massachusetts. On Sunday mornings, he went to church, so on this Sunday morning he was on the lookout for a church to attend.

He drove out of the forest, and into a grassy clearing, and there on a hill was a perfect white weatherboard church. A brass bell – recently polished – in the belltower, an American flag flying out the front. The sign out the front said the service time was 10am. He glanced at his watch at it was 10 to 10, so he pulled into the carpark.

And he parked his orange dodge amongst the black and white and grey cars in the carpark. Got out, and joined the regulars walking into church. Everyone was dressed for church, women in hats, men in suits. Our friend was wearing a suit, too, but his wasn't grey like all the others: it was bright blue, and he wasn't wearing a tie.

The welcomers glanced at each other and welcomed him with a polite "Good morning" he took the welcomer by the hand, pulled him in and wrapped an arm around him "Brother! Praise God for the glorious day", before taking his bible, prayer book and hymn book, and walking into church. It was already quite full, but he found a seat and cheerfully greeted the people sitting around him.

The service began, with the minister reading a sentence of scripture, and our friend responded with a loud "A-men". Then the first hymn began... and the church had never before heard singing quite like it.

The bible readings went fairly smoothly, but at the end of each reading, instead of a quiet "Thanks be to God", there was a loud "Praise God!". One of the elders of the church said "Shhhh".

The minister went up into the pulpit to preach the sermon and began by praying with the words from Psalm 19 "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O God, my rock and redeemer".

"Preach it, brother!"

There was an audible gasp throughout the church. But the minister bravely continued. Each point he made was met with an enthusiastic "A-Men" or "Hallelujah".

Finally, one of the churchwardens could take no more, he went up to our southern friend, put his hand on his shoulder, and said firmly, "I'm sorry sir, you're going to have to leave."

"What's the matter, brother? I got religion!"

"Quite sir, but you didn't get it here".

Have you ever felt like that? Felt the passion, felt the Holy Spirit flowing, but all around are people in shades of grey looking at you with alarm?

Or are you more like the other people in the church, keen to do things the right way, keen to listen, keen to pray, keen to feel the Holy Spirit warming your heart?

Because there's nothing wrong with either. Because the Holy Spirit comes to us all differently, the Holy Spirit moves us all differently, and the Holy Spirit gives us all different gifts. But it is the one Spirit.

And we are blessed with a wide range of traditions and denominations and congregations and services and styles of worship. But it is the one church. It is the one body of Christ.

We have in our New Testament readings today two accounts of the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples. We had the reading from Acts with all the things we associate with Pentecost: The sound like the rush of a violent wind, tongues of fire, and them speaking in other languages. We read of the crowd of devout Jews being bewildered at this. They were amazed and astonished. It was even suggested in verse 13 that they may well have been drunk.

And I wonder if some of those people in that Massachusetts church thought that our southern friend was under the influence, too?

But here in Acts we have this account of the Holy Spirit coming on believers, with noise and fire and passion and speaking in tongues. And some people today, some churches, will say, "Yes! that's our experience of receiving the Holy Spirit!"

I don't think that's generally our experience here at St Ives Uniting, but some of you might have experienced the Holy Spirit like that.

Our gospel reading – which is an excerpt from a reading we had a few weeks ago – gives us quite a different account of the coming of the Holy Spirit, though. John 20 tells us that the risen Jesus has appeared to his disciples, and then "he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'".

He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

No noise. No tongues of fire. No speaking in tongues.

A breath from Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit. If you've been coming to church for a while you might remember that the Greek word 'Pneuma' is used for breath, wind and spirit.

And here we see the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples – Jesus said to them "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven"

Which is better, do you think? The gift of speaking in tongues, or the power to forgive sins?

I don't think there's a right answer. Because we're called to share the gospel and that's what the disciples were doing at that first Pentecost: Speaking in languages isn't just a neat party trick, - it has a clear purpose Acts 2:11 "we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!". We need to communicate with people to share the good news of Jesus too,

and we're also called to forgive sins (as we pray in the Lord's prayer: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us).

The important thing, though, is that though the gifts are different, the giver, the Holy Spirit is the same. There's a wonderful passage in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Co 12:4-6) "Now there are varieties of gifts," he says "but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

So: many gifts, but they all have the same source. Many ways to serve, but ultimately they all serve the same Lord, and many things to do, but we are able to do any of them only because of God's grace.

And there are many, many gifts that we receive from the Holy Spirit – John in his gospel tells us of the power to forgive sins, Luke in Acts tells us about the ability to speak other languages, and in the next section of 1 Corinthians, Paul, gives us a list of a whole lot more: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophesying, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. The implication is that that's not even a comprehensive list.

But Paul is clear, they are all activated by one Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

So, the Spirit comes to us all in different ways, and brings us different gifts. And we are all different, but we are all loved by God, we are all saved by Jesus' death and resurrection, and we are all called to follow him, and to use our gifts – the gifts that each of us receive through the Holy Spirit – to share the good news and grow God's kingdom.

My favourite story of receiving the Holy Spirit isn't Jesus breathing on his disciples, and it isn't the noise and fire of Pentecost, in fact it isn't even in the bible – it's the story of John Wesley, which I shared a few weeks ago. But I think it's particularly appropriate to remember it again this week, because last Wednesday, May 24, was Aldersgate day:

On May 24 1738, at a meeting in Aldersgate Street in London, John Wesley, a failed missionary, heard a reading of Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans, and realised what God's grace in Christ truly meant. It was his conversion experience – he later said "I felt my heart strangely warmed". His experience of receiving the Holy Spirit wasn't all noise and fire, it wasn't even a gentle breath – he simply felt his heart being strangely warmed.

John Wesley received gifts of discernment and knowledge and wisdom and many more, and he used them in the service of God who'd saved him.

He took the gospel to the people – he preached in churches, in the countryside, in halls, houses and private chapels.

He spoke, I guess, in other languages, but not foreign languages: Instead, he spoke in the language of the working classes, of the servants, of the poor, but most of all, he spoke in the language of those who needed to hear the good news.

And that all began with his heart being strangely warmed.

So today, on this Pentecost Sunday, is your heart warmed by the Holy Spirit?

Indeed, as a congregation here, is our collective heart warmed by the Holy Spirit?

Does the fire of God, the fire of Pentecost, burn within us, individually and collectively?

Because it is easy to let the fire dwindle or even die.

It's easy to go through the motions of being a Christian, and of being a member of a church, but without feeling the passion, without rekindling the fire of the Holy Spirit within us.

As Christians, as believers we are called to love. We're called to love God, and we're called to love one another.

We are called to be happy with the work God has done in our lives, and we're called to want to learn and know more about Jesus.

We are called to want to be more like Jesus, and we are called to want to do what he has done for us – to lay down our lives of each other.

And of course, we're called to tell others about Jesus and what he means to us.

But if we don't accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit, if we don't let the Holy Spirit warm our hearts, then we can't do any of those things.

We can be an organisation which does good things, and has a good budget, and is part of the community and is run effectively and efficiently. We can certainly be those things, but without the Holy Spirit warming our hearts – inspiring us and empowering us – we're not really the church.

The Holy Spirit is the one who makes us the church. The one who can bring change in our lives. The Holy Spirit is here for us.

When we say God is with us, we are referring to the presence of God through the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of our sin, and who speaks God's truth to us (John 16:8-9),

The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to God's word, and changes our hearts, attitudes, and actions.

It is the Holy Spirit who produces in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - which are the fruit of the spirit and the hallmarks of a Christian life (Galatians. 5:22-23).

After his resurrection, and immediately before Jesus ascended, he told his disciples (Acts 1:8), "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Holy Spirit gives us power do to just that.

Sometimes we fear having a personal experience with the Holy Spirit. Or we're worried because our experience of the Holy Spirit isn't the same as others' experience.

And instead of living a Spirit filled life, having our hearts warmed and experiencing the power of God, we go through the motions. We do what we've always done. We do what others expect us to. We become afraid of the power of the Spirit.

As we read the beginning of the book of Acts, we find that the disciples were afraid.

Pentecost is literally is fifty days after Passover, and it was seven weeks since the Jesus had been crucified and a lot of things had happened:

The greatest thing was Jesus rising from the dead. Three days after he was placed in a borrowed tomb, it was empty.

Three days after the apostles had given up hope; hope had been given back to them. After his resurrection Jesus appeared to the apostles.

He even made them breakfast on the beach at Galilee.

Then on top of a mountain he gave them the great commission.

And Jesus promised them that the Holy Spirit would come

Then ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven in front of his followers they were in a room in Jerusalem, and they are doing what Jesus had told them to do - they were waiting and they were gathered together to celebrate the Jewish festival of Shavuot – when the Jewish people celebrated the first-fruits of the wheat harvest, and remembered the giving of the Torah – the law – to the Jewish people.

Acts 2:1 tells us, on the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place.

And then the Holy Spirit came to them.

Without the Holy Spirit, Peter and the rest of the disciples wouldn't have had the courage to come out of that place and share the good news of Jesus.

Their belief in the risen Christ, the Son of God, gave them the gift of salvation and of everlasting life with God, but power came to them through the Holy Spirit.

Later in Chapter 2 of Acts, Peter teaches clearly on who receives the Holy Spirit, he says "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)."

If we have turned from the ways of the world, and turned to Jesus, then we have the Holy Spirit living within us.

The Spirit works in different ways, and it can be instantly in a powerful way, or slowly, in a gradual way.

God's desire for us is that we are in a living relationship with him, that we would be like Jesus, and that we can help others into a relationship with him too, and that is a lifetime of work.

But it's work we don't do alone: It's work we are empowered to do by the Holy Spirit, whether we know the Spirit by the noise and fire, the gentle breath, or by our hearts being strangely warmed.

Last weekend, I attended our Presbytery meeting at Mt Colah, and Nich Cole, who's the minister there, led worship, and at the end of his message, he shared a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor, which I think is worth meditating on this Pentecost: "Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby's first breath...or some dying person's lastm[breath]. When Jesus let go of his last breath ... that breath hovered in the air in front of him...It hovered just for a moment...then it was set loose on earth. It was such a ... breath—so full of passion, so full of life—that it did not simply dissipate as so many breaths do. It grew, in strength and volume, until it was a mighty wind, which God sent spinning through the world."

May we all feel that breath on us today, and always.

Amen.