

*Acts 2.1-21; Psalm 104.26-36; 1 Corinthians 12.1-13; Jn 20.19-23.*

The Very Rev'd Thomas Leslie, St Alban's Cathedral

*'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'*

*– 1 Corinthians 12.7*

Often, when we speak of the Holy Spirit, it is in ways that suggest a gentle force, encouraging us to do good, to live rightly: gently promoting us in the ways of holiness. This is not helped by our common depiction of the Spirit in the form of a dove (drawing upon good scriptural resources) and we perhaps expect the same Spirit to behave as placidly as we might imagine a perfect dove to be. We almost try to tame the Spirit: make it an influence which is only ever about Peace, Love and Joy. a fluffy, feathery friend, comforting and comfortable.

We may perhaps want to blame St Paul for this. In his various descriptions of the outworking of the Spirit he speaks of spirit-filled people as demonstrating traits of love, joy, peace patience, kindness, gentleness, and wisdom, healing, knowledge, and faith, amongst others. All these gentle, life-giving gifts are good traits in and of themselves, and definitely aspects of the faith-life of the Church community which are worth developing: but are they the only manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit amongst the people of God?

If we look at our reading from Acts, and at some of spiritual gifts mentioned in First Corinthians, we find a suggestion that, perhaps, rather than being all gentleness and comfort, the Holy Spirit can also be dangerous, unpredictable, and life-changing: a force to be received with joy, but also with caution.

In our passage from Acts, Jesus' disciples, having witnessed Christ's final departure (returning to the place of God), spend the next few days in fervent prayer, gathered together in one house, in Jerusalem. We can imagine that this house, with a large room for gathering, is quite likely the same place that they shared a meal before Christ's betrayal and arrest, the same room into which Mary Magdalene came running with her startling news of the Resurrection, the same place where the disciples witnessed Jesus manifest his wounds to Thomas, and the place in which they heard the testimony of the Emmaus road travellers.

Gathering, and praying over their recent experiences, in and beyond this room, they must have wondered, ‘what next?’

And, on the Feast of Pentecost, they received an answer to their prayer.

Pentecost is a Jewish festival. Literally, the feast of 50 days, it commemorated the giving of the Torah (the law), in the form of the Commandments given to Moses on Mt Sinai/Horeb (the name of the mountain differs between the accounts in Exodus and Deuteronomy). This event, the giving of the law, was traditionally said to occur 50 days after the Israelites left (plague-riddled) Egypt. Thus, just as Passover celebrated the escape of the Israelites out of Egypt, so – 50 days later, Pentecost celebrated the Divine establishment of The Law. And, just as a good Jewish adherent would want to celebrate Passover in the Holy City Jerusalem, so likewise, many would desire to celebrate Pentecost there. For these major festivals the city population swelled (as Josephus tells us), filling up with pious pilgrims from many regions: including many with foreign backgrounds.

On this particular Pentecost, as the crowds milled in the streets, the disciples of Jesus, gathered, praying in one place, experienced a sudden sensation of a sound of rushing wind, and a sense that flames were briefly dancing around their heads.

As anyone who has lived in a bushfire-prone region can attest: the combination of a sound like the rushing of a violent wind, combined with flames is usually a very bad sign.

Flames and wind, however, have very important scriptural precedents as signifiers of the arrival of the presence of God (moments of *theophany*, to use the technical term).

Moses first encountered the voice of God emanating out of a burning bush.

Elijah, seeking God’s counsel whilst huddled on the side of a mountain, only encountered God after a furious windstorm, earthquake and fire had each passed by.

The people of Egypt, sensing that God was leading them through the wilderness, identified God’s presence in a pillar of cloud and fire.

Even in the giving of Torah, as Moses consulted with God upon the mountain, the scriptures suggest that the people of Israel saw only thunder and lightning: wind and fire at work on the mountainside, while they waited nervously below.

It should not surprise us, then, that – on the commemoration of the Mt Sinai event - as God once more manifested a presence to those waiting, hoping and praying for guidance, it should involve wind, and flame.

Yet, note - as L.T Johnson comments – the wind and the flames are not seen or noticed by anyone other than the disciples.

We are not told that a great wind blew through the city, causing crowds to gather: rather, the disciples alone heard a noise which sounded like the rushing of wind, and noticed a change which they described as *looking like* tongues of fire dancing over the heads of those gathered. If the Spirit of God was, indeed, arriving, it was not with a rending-open of the heavens, but (like the burning bush seen only by Moses) a momentary use of symbols to indicate the presence of the Divine.

Crowds begin to gather around the house only when the effect of the Spirit begins to unfold. The disciples: hitherto rather bewildered followers of Jesus, who have spent much of the time since his arrest hiding away in locked rooms (for fear of further accusations, arrests and violence from the Jewish authorities) start speaking boldly, and loudly, of their understanding of who Jesus was, and how his actions had fulfilled God's long-anticipated promise of release from the fear of death.

From this moment it is clear that there has been a change. The disciples cease being followers of Jesus, and start being advocates: they go from hapless witnesses of the Christ event, to active agents of positive change in their world. The Spirit, having descended, seemed to empower them to take direct, decisive, and dramatic action.

And this is the danger, and the joy of God's Spirit: a Spirit which we too have received (poured upon us at our Baptism, and affirmed at our Confirmation, prayed anew over us at our wedding, or ordination, and invoked in moments when we received anointing, or prayer for healing, protection or strength).

God's Spirit, having been encountered, works to empower and change us: to call us into witnessing God's work through our lives, through our loving, through the moments when we are able to offer healing, hope, wisdom, understanding,

or consolation to others. The Spirit calls us to live in joy, and work for Peace, to act with compassion for those in real need (whether known to us, or so unknown). It wells up inside us at moments when we hear of injustices in our world, it flows through us when our hearts yearn to provide for those without shelter, or food, or safety, it quietens our minds to focus upon the needs of those sick or in pain, or causes us to stop and take notice, as a momentary glimpse of the Divine sparkles in our world. It inspires us to work for the common good- for those we love, for those we find hard to love, and for those we don't even particularly know.

The Spirit, having descended, continually goes to work to bring about change: in us, in our lives, and in our world: working to establish that liberation and equality which Jesus lived and administered, and which the disciples, at that Pentecost event began to shout out about, so joyously transformed by the understanding of how God was at work in their world, through them.

Hmm, that Holy Spirit: it is not quite so fluffy, feathered, or comforting is it? And thank God for that.