

## **Sermon: “Pentecost”: Acts 2: 1-12; 1 Corinthians 12: 1-13; John 7: 37-52; Numbers 11:24-30**

### Introduction

A number of years ago, Rob and I, with a number of friends, went to see the London Symphony Orchestra perform at the Sydney Opera House. They were playing a suite of 3 movements by famous 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian composers. Listening to them, I could not help but feel that it was a little like church – the music seemed like an eclectic cacophony and yet hung together and sounded brilliant. Further, some sections of the orchestra worked very hard (e.g., the string instruments, especially the violins) and others hardly at all (e.g., the trianglist who played 3 individual notes the entire night, all at exactly the right moment). Like church, we seem to be doing a lot of different things in an apparently uncoordinated fashion, and yet it all hangs together. Further, some are called to perform ministries and activities that require a lot of time and effort, while others are called to perform seemingly less onerous roles, but done in just the right way at the right time (not a moment too soon nor too late).

Today is Pentecost Sunday (also known as Whitsunday) where we celebrate the promised coming of the Holy Spirit in power on the Apostles, Mary and other followers of Jesus. The word ‘Pentecost’ means ‘fiftieth’ and it refers to the ‘Festival of Shavuot’ (in the Hebrew OT) – we know it as the ‘Festival of Weeks’ (Deut.16:10; Ex.34:22) – which is celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover. This Festival was celebrating the wheat harvest, and was associated with the giving of the law and the renewal of the covenant. For some people at the Day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, the renewal of the covenant would have a whole new personal meaning. This leads us to the Acts 2 reading.

## Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21)

We are told from today's Acts reading that at this Day of Pentecost there were many devout ("God-fearing") Jews from many nations (listed in vv.5, 9-11) in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit was poured-out on the Apostles, and others, and "They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them" and they spoke in foreign (human) languages (vv.3-4). The crowd heard this sound. They also heard their own language being spoken, which made them bewildered and amazed – some even mocked.

Peter then speaks and provides an explanation (based on the prophet Joel [2:28-32]) of what just happened. It was not inherently evangelistic, but does end with an evangelistic note: "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". In the Joel prophecy, which Peter cites, he says: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (vv.17-18). Luke shows that the Spirit belongs to all God's people when he narrates that the Spirit "filled the whole house they were sitting" (vv.2-3), and "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (v.4).

One of the major points of this Acts reading is the out-pouring of the promised Holy Spirit. But where does this promise come from? And, how do we receive the Holy Spirit? An answer comes from the John reading of today (7:37-52).

## The Promise of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-52)

The background scene in the Gospel reading is the last day of the Festival of Tabernacles (v.37). On this day there is a water libation, which may be the

backdrop to Jesus's invitation to those who are thirsty: to come to Him and drink and He will give "living water" (vv.37-38). John tells us that Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit (v.39a), which is an occasion where He promised to give the Holy Spirit (v.39b). (Other occasions in John's Gospel are: 14:15-31; 15:26-27; 16:7, 15.)

So how do we receive the Holy Spirit? In verse 39a, John tells us that those who "believes in"<sup>1</sup> Jesus receives the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the source of the "living water" (the Holy Spirit) and we receive that "living water" by faith in Jesus.

What happens when we receive the Holy Spirit? According to today's Gospel passage, we receive "living water" – a promise made many times in John's Gospel: that whoever believes in Jesus, receives new life (3:15-16; 5:24; 6:35, 40, 47).

How do we see the Holy Spirit at work? and for what purpose?

Gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:1-13); The Appointment of Elders (Numbers 11:24-30)

Today's readings show a number of ways in which the Holy Spirit is revealed. In the OT Numbers reading (11:24-30), seventy elders were appointed. Some of the Spirit that was on Moses was temporarily placed on them and they prophesied (vv.24-25). The Hebrew word used here ("hithpael") is the same word used when the Spirit of God came upon Saul (1 Sam 10:10-11) and he "fell into a prophetic frenzy". The seventy elders were at the Tent of Meeting, which was located away from the people in the camp. Interestingly, two elders (Eldad and Medad) were in the camp with the people, and the Spirit came on them as

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<sup>1</sup> "Believes in" (John 7: 38 NIV/NRSV) – Greek is "pisteúōn eis"; "pisteúōn" participle of pisteuō (believe [in], faith [in])

well and they also were prophesying (v.26). In an attempt to bring order and control to the situation, Joshua asked Moses should he stop them (v.28). But Moses replied that he “wish[ed] that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them” (v.29). Also, in the Acts reading the Holy Spirit was revealed through tongues of fire and where the people spoke in human languages that many from different nations could understand (Acts 2:4, 6).

And so, we come to the 1 Corinthians reading. Here Paul responds to a question on “spiritual gifts”, or “spiritual people”<sup>2</sup>, from the Corinthian church, not wanting them to be “uninformed” (v.1), and he states that through the Holy Spirit we say “Jesus is Lord” (v.3). Paul mentions that there are: different (spiritual) gifts, but it is the Holy Spirit that distributes them (v.4); “different kinds of service, but the same Lord” (v.5); and “different kinds of working, but in all and in everyone it is the same God at work” (v.6).

In verse 7, he states that “to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (v.7). Then, in verses 8-10 he lists a number of types of manifestations (or expression) of the Spirit, which he ends with “All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines” (v.11). Of interest to note here: (1) each Christian will receive an expression of the Spirit, which reflects the promise of Jesus that those who believe in Him receive “living water” (the Holy Spirit); (2) the Spiritual expressions are for the “common good”; (3) the diversity of expressions of the

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<sup>2</sup> Sampley JP, 2002, p941. Greek can be translated either “spiritual gifts” or “spiritual People” – also “spiritualists” or “those who are spiritual”: interpreted as referring to mature Christians, or possibly to elitist claims due to special or unusual mature Spirit connections.

Spirit; and (4) it is the Holy Spirit that determines their distribution, timing and occasion, not us.

Finally, in verses 12-13, Paul uses the body metaphor to describe believers interrelationship with one another. That interrelationship and unity of the body is based in the believers baptism by the work of the Holy Spirit regardless of any differences. That is, collectively we become one because of the Holy Spirit's work in our baptism and thus any distinctions become insignificant.

### Reflections

On reflection, a number of points can be made:

1. "Jesus is Lord". Through the Holy Spirit we make and affirm this ancient confession;
2. God has poured out on all believers the Holy Spirit, which we received when we believed in Jesus as our Lord. Through the Holy Spirit, we are united into one Body in Christ, though many parts – to each believer is given a manifestation of the Spirit, distributed as the Holy Spirit determines;
3. As such, there is a diversity of gifts, services and works, which are given for the common good. We are all equal and make an important and valuable contribution to the body, great or small – remember the orchestra story mentioned at the beginning. Unity of the body is important, and we have unity in diversity, not uniformity; and
4. Finally, we cannot control the Holy Spirit. He fills, empowers and enables us for ministry as He chooses.