

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Genesis 11. 1-9

Acts 2. 1-21

John 14. 8-17, 25-27

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

A number of years ago, some of you may remember having seen a film called *Forrest Gump*, which was acclaimed by the public and received six Oscars. In it, Tom Hanks plays the role of a handicapped man who sits on a park bench and recounts the story of his life in the second half of 20th-century America.

Amongst the many adventures that Hanks describes is his stint in the Viet Nam war, where he saves a man called Lieutenant Dan, who is injured in battle and loses both legs. Lieutenant Dan believes that it was his destiny to die in the war, and he's angry with Gump for having saved his life. He's also angry at God. After the war is over, in one of the scenes of the film, we see Forrest Gump and Lieutenant Dan as they are working as members of a struggling shrimp boat crew. The legless Lieutenant Dan is at the very top of the mast. Down below, Forrest Gump is sorting through another empty shrimp net. And at that frustrating moment, in a sarcastic and mocking tone, Lieutenant Dan asks Gump, 'Where is this God of yours?' In one of the great lines of the film, Gump comments in a voice-over, 'It's funny that Lieutenant Dan said that, 'cause right then, God showed up.'

The shrimp boat is caught in the brutal wind and storm of hurricane Camille. The sea boils. The winds lash at the boat and roar. Lightning burns across the sky.

When God shows up in *Forrest Gump*, the signs of his presence are unmistakable. And in the second chapter of the book of Acts, we read a similar report.

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost,¹ things got all stirred up.

What actually happened on that historic day when this great event took place?

St Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that ‘When the day of Pentecost came, they² were all together in one place’ (2. 1); and suddenly, the Spirit of God came upon them. His coming was accompanied by three supernatural signs – a sound, a sight and strange speech. First, ‘a sound like the rush of a violent wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting’ (2. 2). Secondly, there appeared to them visibly ‘divided tongues, as of fire...and a tongue rested on each of them’ (2. 3). And thirdly, ‘all of them were filled with Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability’ (2. 4).

These three experiences that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit – wind, fire and speech – seemed like natural phenomena; and yet they were supernatural both in origin and in character. The noise was not wind, but sounded like it; the sight was not fire, but resembled it; and the speech was in languages which sounded ordinary, but in some way, were ‘other’.³

When the Spirit came at Pentecost, he came with such commotion that the devout, God-fearing Jews who were in Jerusalem gathered together to see what was happening. Here they were in the Holy City to celebrate the Feast of the Harvest, Jews from every corner of the then-known world; and each of them heard these rustic, uncultured Galileans speaking in their native language, declaring the wonders

¹ The day of Pentecost (*pentekostos* means fifty) was the 50th day after the Sabbath of Passover week (cf. Lev 23. 15-16), thus the first day of the week. Pentecost is also called the Feast of Weeks (cf. Deut 16. 10, 16), the Feast of Harvest (cf. Ex 23. 16) and the day of the firstfruits (cf. Num 28. 26). Towards the end of the inter-testamental period, however, Pentecost began also to be observed as the anniversary of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, because this was reckoned as having happened fifty days after the Exodus.

² Although the nearest antecedent of ‘they’ is the 11 apostles (plus Matthias), some have argued that the reference is to the 120 people mentioned in Acts 1. 13-15.

³ John Stott has suggested that the noise like wind may have symbolised the power which Jesus had promised the disciples for their witness (Lk 24. 49, Acts 1. 8); the sight like fire, purity (like the live coal which cleansed Is 6. 6-7); and the speech in other languages, the universality of the Christian church.

of God in their own tongue (2. 11). Not only were they amazed; they were perplexed. As the disciples were shaken and seized with power, some of the bystanders mocked them and accused them of being drunk (2. 12).

Yet in fact, the disciples who spoke in tongues at Pentecost did not do so as a result of intoxication; their tongues, in this first case at least, were not a case of incoherent utterance;⁴ each disciple was given a supernatural ability to speak in recognisable languages. When the Spirit came at Pentecost, he created a new unity⁵ for the Christian church by transcending racial, national and linguistic barriers. On that historic day in Jerusalem, the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that nations would now be gathered together in Christ, prefiguring that great day when the redeemed people of God will be drawn from ‘every nation, tribe, people and language’.⁶

The Day of Pentecost represents many things for us, individually and as a Church. I would like to suggest that there are four ways that we can think about the Pentecost event:

- Firstly, the Day of Pentecost was the final act of the saving ministry of our Lord before his Second Coming (*Parousia*). Jesus, who was born into our humanity, lived our life, died for our sins, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, sent his Spirit to his people in Acts 2 to gather them together as his body and to work out *in them* what we had won *for them*.
- Secondly, we see that Pentecost brought to the apostles the equipment that they needed for their special role. Christ had appointed them to be his

⁴ The references to tongues (*glossolalia*) in Acts 10. 46 and 19. 6 indicate the speaking of foreign languages. In 1 Cor 12 and 14, the references to tongue-speaking are different; in these instances, the tongue-speaker (1 Cor 12. 10 – 11, 1 Cor 14. 2) ‘does not speak to men, but to God’. Some commentators have suggested that these latter references are to tongues which are either earthly *or heavenly*, and which require interpretation to be understood. Whilst the gift of tongues in Acts 2 was a sign to bear witness to the giving of the Spirit, the references in 1 Corinthians are to the gift of tongues as it is given to the Church for its edification.

⁵ Ever since the early Church fathers, commentators have seen the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel.

⁶ Cf. Rev 7. 9.

authoritative witnesses, and had promised them that the Holy Spirit would be sent to them to teach them.⁷ Pentecost was the fulfilment of that promise.

- Thirdly, and very importantly, Pentecost was the inauguration of the new era of the Spirit. Although the coming of the Holy Spirit was a specific and unique event in history, the people of God can now, always and everywhere benefit from his ministry. As the Holy Spirit equipped the apostles to be primary, first-hand (eye)-witnesses, so he equips us today to be his witnesses, and more. The fulness of the Spirit is available now for us all.
- Finally, Pentecost has been called, quite rightly, the first ‘revival’, one of those wonderful, unusual visitations of God, in which a whole community becomes vividly aware of his immediate, overpowering presence.⁸ We must be careful, however: the fact that the Holy Spirit came and prompted a revival in the first century is not an excuse for us to lower our expectations. Today; yes, even today, God intends that the *on-going experience* of the Christian church be one of new life, joy, fellowship, worship, freedom and power.

And this leads us quite naturally to ask the question, ‘How does God give his Spirit today?’

First of all, we know from the Scriptures that every one of us who is a Christian has received the gift of the Spirit. As St Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, ‘In (Christ) you also, when you had heard the word of truth...and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our

⁷ Cf. Jn 14. 26.

⁸ The physical phenomena (Acts 2. 2ff), the deep conviction of sin (2. 37), the 3,000 conversions (2. 41) and the widespread sense of awe (2. 43) were all signs of revival.

inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory' (1. 13-14). The gift of the Spirit comes to us at that moment when we believe in Christ.

What's more, in our Acts passage and elsewhere in the New Testament, we find other texts that refer not only to the *giving* of the Holy Spirit, but rather to the *filling* of the Holy Spirit. In his same letter to the Ephesian church, St Paul writes, 'Do not get drunk with wine...; instead, *be filled with the Spirit*' (5. 18). In the original text, the Greek present tense is used to indicate that the filling of the Spirit is not a once-for-all experience. To the contrary, repeatedly, and as the occasion requires, we are to come to God and ask for the filling⁹ of the Spirit so that we may be empowered for worship, service and testimony.

Day by day, moment by moment, we are to seek to be filled with the Spirit of God, just as the apostles were on the Day of Pentecost.

Amen.

⁹ The word used by St Luke to describe the experience when people are given an initial endowment of the Spirit to fit them for God's service (Acts 9. 17; Lk 1. 15) and also when they are inspired to make important utterances (Acts 4. 8, 31; 13. 9); related words are used to describe the continuous process of being filled with the Spirit (Acts 13. 52; Eph 5. 8) or the corresponding state of being full (Acts 6. 3, 5; 7. 55; 11. 24; Lk 4. 1). These references indicate that a person already filled with the Spirit can receive a fresh filling for a specific task, or a continuous filling. It is also important to observe that what is here called a 'filling' is called a 'baptising' (Acts 1. 5 and 11. 16), a 'pouring out' (Acts 2. 17ff; 10: 45), and a 'receiving' (Acts 10. 47). The basic act of receiving the Spirit can be described as being baptised or filled, but the word 'baptise' is not used for subsequent experiences.