

Pentecost Sunday 2010

Acts 2.1-21
John 14.8-17 & 25-27

One Sunday, in Church, the Sunday school were giving a presentation about the Trinity.

The children had been practicing for weeks.

Child number one stood up and said her piece about God the Father.

Child number two stood up and said his piece about God the Son.

Then there was an awkward pause?

Where was child number three to complete the presentation?

“Erh, excuse me Miss” said another child from the Sunday school to her Sunday school teacher, “but I don’t think the Holy Spirit made it to church today.”

Now, don’t get me wrong. I think the Holy Spirit always “makes it” to church. Jesus’ promise was that where two or three were gathered, he would be there in their midst (Matthew 18.20). And we know that it is by his Spirit that he does this.

But I wonder if sometimes as Christians we struggle a little bit to understand who this Holy Spirit is, and to relate to him practically, to experience his very real presence?

On this day of Pentecost, as we remember the outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit upon the fledgling church, I wanted to share just a little about the Holy Spirit, and particularly what he does, in the hope that we might experience and make the most of his presence.

And I’ll do so under the two headings of
“The presence of God”
And “The power of God”.

So, the presence of God:

Our gospel reading this morning sees Jesus sharing a last supper with his friends, the apostles.

He's just told them that he is going away (John 14.3), but he then reassures them by saying that he will send them "another counsellor" or "advocate" or "comforter" (14.16), who is the "Spirit of Truth" (14.17).

Whilst the apostles might not experience Jesus' presence in the same way ever again – as Jesus spoke he was about to die, rise, and ascend to heaven – they would have the opportunity to experience the presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Now having someone 'present' with us can be a wonderful thing, in so many ways;

Whether it's the presence of a lover to walk hand in hand with across a deserted beach,

A teacher to guide you through a difficult maths problem,

A barrister to argue your case in court.

And as Jesus' apostles were about to learn, there was nothing better than having Jesus 'present' with them each moment of each day, by his Holy Spirit.

And what was true for them, is equally true for us.

So, according to our passage from John's gospel, how would Jesus' presence with the apostles, and us, be of benefit to us?

Well,

John 14.15: The Holy Spirit was, and is, to be a counsellor. Not the sort of counsellor who asks us to sit in their office and share our inner anxieties (useful as that might be), but rather a counsellor in the sense of one who comes alongside to strengthen, to encourage and to speak on our behalf.

We might usefully think of the captain of a group of soldiers moving amongst his men before battle; speaking a word of encouragement here, giving a piece of advice there; someone who will speak up for his men as they need it, defending their cause.

John 14.16: The Holy Spirit was, and is, to be a teacher and guide. He is the Spirit of truth.

We live in a very uncertain age, where it is hard to reach a consensus on the truth of anything.

Old certainties are gone, and as a society we struggle to work out on what basis we are to order our common life together.

The Church is struggling to know the truth, as recent debates about the practice of homosexuality and women bishops have shown.

And if I'm honest, I also often struggle to know what to do for the best in any given situation.

When I meet a couple requesting re-marriage in church and have to work through a set of diocesan guidelines to decide whether to conduct the service or not, I feel often feel quite at a loss what to do for the best.

Perhaps you feel the same in your line of work, as you grapple with issues of the ethics of genetic research, the implementation of codes of good practice, with how to cut costs (jobs) in a recession.

Fortunately for those of us who are Christians, God has said much in his Word about many of the decisions we must make as a society, a church, and individuals.

But even Christians seeking to faithfully follow God's Word, need help.

As it is possible for a child doing a piece of comprehension work at school to read a piece of Shakespeare and completely misunderstand its meaning, so it is possible for us to read the Bible and misunderstand.

We need the guidance of the Spirit, like a teacher leaning over her pupil's shoulder and pointing out words and explaining phrases, to help us come to right conclusions.

The apostle James writes, "If any of you lacks wisdom you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault." (James 1.5).

John 14.18: The Spirit was, and is, the adopter of children. "I will not leave you as orphans" says Jesus, as he promises the coming of his Spirit.

One of the great curses of our modern, enlightened society is loneliness.

In a recent survey, 21% of 18-24 year olds said that one of their main concerns in life is loneliness...staggering when you think of the million ways they have to communicate!

It's surely not insignificant that one of the most successful TV shows of the 1990's was the American sitcom Friends.

All of us need relationships; we need to love and be loved if we are to be fully human.

Jesus said that by the Holy Spirit, God the Father would adopt Jesus' friends as children.

And so by following Jesus we might find the ultimate relationship, that of parent – child, with Almighty God.

And we might know that we are eternally loved.

So, the presence of the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus in this short passage in John, means we can experience Jesus counselling (comforting) us, teaching us, and giving us relationship with God.

Lets, then, move on to the power of the Holy Spirit.

There's a song some of you will know by Delamitri called "Nothing Ever happens"

*Bill hoardings advertise products that nobody needs
While angry from Manchester writes to complain about
All the repeats on T.V.
And computer terminals report some gains
On the values of copper and tin
While American businessmen snap up Van Goghs
For the price of a hospital wing
Nothing ever happens, nothing happens at all
The needle returns to the start of the song
And we all sing along like before*

There are times when it feels like we have got stuck in an endless cycle of "the same old same old".

And change seems impossible.

Whether it's in our own lives as we get caught again and again in the same cycle of negative thoughts or sinful actions or hurtful behaviours.

Or whether it's as a society that we keep making the same mistakes and the same people at the bottom of the pile keep getting hurt again and again.

But Pentecost gives us hope that change is possible – by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, as flames of fire and with the rushing of wind, change happened:

Followers of Jesus, huddled for fear in an upper room broke out into the market place.

People divided by different languages since the tower of Babel heard the good news of Jesus preached, all in their own tongue.

People came to faith in Jesus and 3000 people were added to the Church.

With this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a new day, a new era had dawned.

Change became possible:

On a personal level:

People changing from enemies of God to become his children.

People being healed of past hurts and pains, current illness, fears of the future.

People being released from addictions and sin.

People being set free from a life in the shadows to life in all its fullness.

And on a corporate level:

Society transformed as, like a tiny mustard seed growing into a giant tree, God's kingdom of love and joy and peace became a reality.

Let me end by telling you two stories.

The first is of an old lady I knew, who fell and broke her hip.

She was in much pain and quite distressed, and for some time questioned why God had allowed this to happen.

However, the next time I went to see her, she was all smiles.

"It's the most amazing thing" she said, "I feel that the pain I've been suffering has given me just a tiny insight into how Jesus suffered for me".

Jesus, by his Spirit, had met her in her suffering and opened her eyes to his love for her...and given her peace.

The second is of a lady who asked me to Christen (baptise) her.

She had recently discovered that she had never been Christened and it bothered her. I suggested she came on a course we were running exploring the Christian faith, called Alpha.

At the end of the course we talked again about Christening/baptism.

"I'm so glad", she said, "that you didn't just go ahead and Christen me. I wouldn't have had a clue what it was about. But now I've given my life to Jesus and I want to be baptised as a sign of my commitment to following him."

She's now been baptised in front of the whole church, and attends regularly, bringing her teenage kids when she can.

...another life changed by the Holy Spirit.

May we pray...

And in a moments silence you might like to ponder how you need God's Spirit.

It may be you are in the midst of difficult circumstances and need his encouragement.

It may be that you are in the midst of difficult decisions, and you need guidance and a knowledge of God's truth.

It may be that you are struggling with personal issues or sins and you fear that change is not possible; and you need the Holy Spirit to break in and change you.

It may be you want the power of the Spirit so you can make a change in your family or the wider community or world, for the better.

It may be you just want more of God...

Holy Spirit, come now, and fill us we pray.

For we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen

If you are reading this on the internet, please feel free to e-mail any comments or questions to me at eflector@googlemail.com. If you don't want me to use them (anonymously) as part of a discussion on the web site then please mark them 'confidential'.