

Come, Holy Spirit? (Acts 2.1-21)

Pentecost/Whitsunday

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Come Holy Spirit... *Veni Sancte Spiritus...* *Ven Espíritu Santo...* *Viens Saint-Esprit...* *Komm heiliger Geist...* All over the world, in thousands of different languages, Christians are reciting these words in worship today. Which raises the question of what it is we're asking when we say these words? What does it mean to pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit'? Who is this Spirit? What's she like? How does she work?

We use many different metaphors and titles for the Holy Spirit and these are suggestive - *fire, breath, wind, life, oil, a bird, water; speech, song, harmony, creativity, dance, play, energy, power, wisdom; sanctifier, convicter, comforter, quickener, counsellor, advocate, seal, deposit, gifter, guide, intercessor, witness, teacher, revealer, confirmer, envisioner, enemy of apathy, midwife of change, call of God's promised future, the dearest freshness deep down things* Wow, what a list! And each of these terms communicates something of the Spirit's nature and ministry, so when we pray for the coming of the Spirit, do we experience all of this? Do we decide how she manifests; do our expectations have anything to do with it or does God determine when and what we need?

As I was pondering all of this earlier in the week, my mind went back to my first ministry placement, Temora, in a rural town on the edge of the Riverina. It was the week leading up to Pentecost and I was sitting in my study one morning earnestly praying that prayer - *Come, Holy Spirit*. Nothing tangible seemed to be happening, but then I thought I saw something through something the opaque window beside my chair - a flicker... like a flame, a fire. *We'll that's great, God (I thought), you missed!!* Here am I praying in my study, and the action happens outside ... (And then I thought) *Hang on... what is that??* I raced to the door and there in the garden right outside my window the bush was burning with flames licking ten feet into the sky. And beside it, looking slightly sheepish, was my four-year old son: '*Just doing a bit of back burning Dad*', he said, '*like the farmers in their paddocks*'. Grrr... I raced for the hose and managed to put it out before the whole garden went up. Needless to say, Alex made himself fairly scarce for a time!!

Now, it makes for a great story. And although the timing was uncanny, I've got to say, it wasn't what I envisaged happening when I prayed that prayer. I was hoping for inspiration, empowerment; for a special anointing on my life and ministry. I was hoping this would lead to growth and blessing in our congregation. In a somewhat cheeky, and totally unexpected way (and this does seem to be a feature of the Spirit) the incident reminded me that it wasn't all about me and my plans, that it's about a whole lot more than that, as is clear when we read Acts. So, let's take a closer look and see what Luke has to say about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The story is located in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, one of the annual festivals of the Jewish people - the festival of Harvest (Exod 23.16) or of Weeks (Exod 34.22). We can tell this story is significant for Luke because of (i) where he places it in his larger story, (ii) the detail he goes into when telling it, and (iii) the portentous introduction it receives:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages...

Now, as readers of scripture, we know that the Spirit of God has been operative in the past - hovering over the watery chaos in the creation story of Genesis 1, for example; guiding leaders such as Moses in the Exodus, and Gideon and Deborah in the time of the Judges, and, inspiring prophets like Elijah and Amos. In Luke 3, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus after his baptism, and in Luke 4 led him into the wilderness testing. Later, in the synagogue, he proclaimed: *'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind...'*

While we speak of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost as a new thing, it's important to recognize this connection with God's past action and revelation. What is new in Acts, is the breadth and universality of what's unfolding. Peter says as much, when he gets up to explain it to the astonished crowd. This is what the prophet Joel was talking about when he said: *'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...'* Whereas before, the Spirit's anointing and presence was limited to

specific individuals and tasks, now she is for everyone regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and social standing. This is a sign that we've entered the messianic age. For Peter and Luke, Joel's 'last days' commenced with the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

We didn't hear this in the reading, but if Alan had continued, we'd have heard how Peter's moved on from explaining the events of the day to proclaiming the events of Jesus. In other words, the way to understand this universal outpouring of the Spirit with its dramatic manifestation on *this* day, in *these* believers, is to understand what God was doing in and through Jesus, namely, visiting and restoring creation - redeeming it from the power of death.

... this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power, Peter declared in his speech. (Acts 2.23-4)

'This Jesus, God raised up', he said, a little later,

and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. (Acts 2.32-3)

Now, with this in mind, let's return to the question of what we're asking when we pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit'? A superficial reading of Acts 2 might lead us to think it's all about signs and wonders - tongues, healings, and the like. I've seen many Christians praying with that agenda in mind. I've done so myself. And, while I'm not saying this is insignificant, what this prayer is *essentially* about, I suggest, is being more deeply engaged with God and God's work in the world - the *missio Dei*. In Acts 2, signs and wonders do accompany the outpouring, but notice what happens as these disciples receive this Spirit - they start speaking in other languages, in the tongues of the peoples gathered at the festival, communicating with words these people can understand - letting them in on the good news. '*In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power*', they say, and many were touched and changed.

You see what's happening - the disciples are being drawn in, the Spirit that fills them is connecting them more deeply. They're becoming participants with God in God's

work in the world. 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you', Jesus had said, just before he ascended, 'and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). And when the Spirit comes, that's what occurs, they start looking out and speaking out, bearing witness to someone and something bigger than themselves. And, as Acts continues, we see this radiating out in ever broadening circles - to the ends of the earth...

So, friends, when we pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit', that's what we're asking - for *inspiration* (literally) - that God will breathe into us and galvanize us in action. Throughout his gospel, Luke insisted that when God entered human history, the status quo was shaken and the world began to change - lives and traditions were turned upside down and inside out as God's self-giving and transforming love took hold of them. And now, here in Acts, with the Spirit of the risen Christ poured out on a fledgling church, he insists that this revolution continue. And you and I are part of it - part of this unfolding.

So, this Pentecost, let us pray that God will continue this work in and through us; pray for a world radically renewed in the image of its Creator and Redeemer; pray that we continue to be and become the people we're created and redeemed to be - opened up to God, opened out to the world. Let us pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit'.

I invite you to recite again the opening responses on our service sheet:

Come, Holy Spirit

breath and fire of God.

Come, Holy Spirit,

wind on which the Gospel is borne,

anywhere and to anyone in the world.

Come, Holy Spirit

giver of light and life.

Come, Holy Spirit

and renew the face of the earth.

Come Holy Spirit

that we may spend and be spent

in the work of love and goodness,

dancing in the pattern of our Lord and Saviour,

to the praise and glory of God.