

## Pentecost Come, Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-21)

In their book, *The Holy Spirit*, published in 2015, American theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon claim their intention is not to write something new but rather to remind believing communities of what they may have forgotten about the place and role of Holy Spirit. We are all capable of forgetting, and Pentecost Sunday seems a good time to remind ourselves of who the Holy Spirit is, how she works, and how we might recognise and welcome her presence in and among us. There are four chapters in the book, each focussing on a dimension of the Holy Spirit's activity.

In chapter 1, they give a brief exposition of how the Holy Spirit *is* integrally part of the Godhead, (the third person in the Trinity) and so indivisibly involved in God's mission of creation and redemption. As part of this discussion, the authors note the biblical insistence that the Holy Spirit rests on bodies and has a 'proclivity for the material'. For Christians, 'spiritual life' is *embodied* life (as I suggested in last week's reflection). The Spirit comes, not to rescue us *from* the material, but to transform us and the whole of creation in and through our bodily existence. As Hauerwas says in another piece, 'the God we worship as Christians is a God who wills to be present to his creation in a startlingly particular fashion' (2015). He goes on to cite Claude Welch, who observed that, though the Holy Spirit is free to remain transcendent over all forms of life, it is clear from scripture that she works in time with what is tangible.

*God does not choose to redeem history apart from history, nor create new community apart from human community. The Spirit works in and by means of flesh and time and human togetherness.*

So what does this mean? If I think about how the Spirit might be working materially in our community, I think of such things as the collaboration with Benedictus, and the conversation with other inner north congregations, and our interaction with other church and community groups using our facilities. In recent weeks, activity on our site has reduced to curb the spread of COVID-19, but this does not mean the Spirit is restricted, for she is nothing if not creative. For example, during the restrictions she has been actively encouraging the church to be creative in communication, worship, and care of one another. So much so that new connections have been made in neighbourhoods, and acts of kindness have flourished. During the time of isolation, peace, patience, gentleness and self-control have been much in evidence in our community, and beyond. All of this, the

emergence of new connections and possibilities, our receiving of insight and growth in character, signs of the expanding of the circle of love and concern, is what happens when the Spirit is present.

In Chapter 2 of their book, Hauerwas and Willimon focus on the story of Pentecost, which we are reading again this weekend. They discuss the Spirit's role in calling, constituting and sustaining the church to play its part in the mission of God, and in disrupting congregations when they become self-centred, complacent and compromised. Examples of this abound in the Book of Acts. It was the Spirit that directed the fledgling church (initially composed of Jews) to welcome Gentiles into their community. And it is the same Spirit that today makes congregations uneasy with limiting their focus to the maintenance and safekeeping of status quo. As we open ourselves to the presence and guidance of the Spirit, creativity, truthfulness, courage, generosity and joy abound.

In chapter 3, the purifying work of the Spirit is the focus of discussion, and in particular our Christian vocation to grow in personal and communal holiness. From a Christian point of view, 'a spirituality that does not entail growth in virtue, and growth in active love of neighbour, cannot be the work of the Holy Spirit', the authors write. At the same time, Hauerwas and Willimon understand that Christian holiness is *not* in the first instance about self-generated moral performance, but about our willingness to let ourselves be drawn by the Spirit into the life of God. 'Be ye perfect', Jesus says (Matthew 5.48). Wrongly understood this sounds like a command to work hard to wrangle the evil desires of the flesh into line and pull ourselves up by our spiritual bootlaces. But we don't make ourselves holy simply by willpower and sheer muscular effort. As the Pope has said, 'anything done out of anxiety, pride or the need to impress others will not lead to holiness'.

True Christian virtue is the outworking of God's Spirit within us. Becoming 'perfect' (whole or holy) is a process of being transformed by grace, and this recognition constitutes a perennial corrective to the temptation of Christians and Christian communities to be self-righteous and moralistic. Of course, habits of self-control and moral discipline are necessary dimensions of the process of sanctification. Paul tells us that self-control is part of the '*fruit of the Spirit*' (Galatians 5), Peter exhorts readers to '*discipline yourselves*' (1 Peter 1.13). But such habits are not an end in themselves, only ever the means by which we put ourselves in the way of the Spirit. The primary agent of our transformation is not our own willpower but the loving presence of the Spirit.

Prayer is central in this process of sanctification, and in particular contemplative prayer. If true holiness is the fruit of our participation in the life of God, then self-emptying or self-dispossessing prayer (which is what I mean by contemplative prayer) is how we participate in this divine life. In this way of prayer (also called meditation) we seek to be still and undefended before God, to let go of striving and our need to control and construct our lives, including our 'goodness'. We also seek to be silent, outwardly and inwardly, to let go of thoughts and words, preoccupations and justifications, demands and distractions. We humble ourselves and seek simply to be available to and for God. And in this way, over time, we are drawn ever deeper into divine life. As Paul teaches in Romans 8, prayer is the means by which we open ourselves to 'live according to the Spirit' (v.5) And paradoxically, it is the Spirit who enables us to pray, who prays in and through us. *'The Spirit helps us in our weakness'*, Paul writes, *'we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words'* (v.26). This yielding to God by the Spirit is liberating and life-giving, as we see over and over again in the lives of the saints. 'Joy is the unmistakable indication of a life of holiness shaped by the Holy Spirit', Hauerwas and Willimon note, 'Spirit-induced holiness and Spirit-filled joy tend to complement one another'.

In the fourth and final chapter of their book, the authors discuss the significance of Jesus having been raised from death in the power of the Holy Spirit, and Paul's claim that, in the Spirit, we too live on the other side of death. Christians live in a different kind of time 'from the world's time', sharing already in the life that is to come, and so no longer run by the fear of death. This may put us 'in tension with the world' because 'the world' is too often determined by the denial of death. Christians, however, 'are a people who, under the guidance of the Spirit, know how to be honest about death and how to be present to one another in death'. This all sounds right, although interestingly, the authors do seem a little preoccupied with the 'dying church' and with calling on the Holy Spirit to arrest its demise.

They rightly bring out the radical dependence of Christian life on the presence, gifts and call of the Spirit, and rightly suggest (I think) that the desiccation and domestication of many 'mainstream' churches follows from refusing the vulnerability and openness of life in the Spirit. Always, it seems important that we the church hope and pray for the recovery of 'a radical sense of what God wants us to be' – 'Come, Holy Spirit', must be central in our praying. At the same time, it is important to remember that in the Christian life, new life and renewed vocation are always received on the other side of a death. As the events

of Easter reveal, death is not always a result of faithlessness and insufficient connection to the true Source of our life. Sometimes it is the necessary passage – a paschal mystery, a dying into life.

What if the ‘dying’ of the church in some of its forms is (at least in part) the work of the Spirit, seeking to draw us ever deeper into dependence on God and communion with all? And what if radical faithfulness at this time is not so much about seeking with all our might to ignore or avert this decline, but about remaining non-anxiously receptive, listening for what the Spirit is asking of us, and responding accordingly?

Of course, we need to discern differences here, to be prepared to die to complacency, self-interest and self-possessed security, to be accountable to the Spirit of truth and open to revitalising grace. At the same time, the mere fact of our decline (in numbers or influence, for example) need not signify the absence or neglect of the Spirit. Where we are prayerful and handed over, we need not fear what unfolds. For Christians are a people constituted by the promise of resurrection, and who knows what new thing is being wrought in this movement beyond Christendom, through the desert and the tomb, in which we are called to participate?

‘Come, Holy Spirit’ rings as a persistent refrain through the pages of this book. It is a key prayer for God’s people to pray. It does not save us from death. Rather it invites us to yield ourselves wholly to the life of God, whatever our circumstances, whatever is unfolding, trusting that true renewal of life comes only if, and as, we dare to let it go. Come, Holy Spirit, come!

#### References

- Hauerwas, Stanley & Willimon William H (2015) *The Holy Spirit*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.  
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Welch, Claude (2014) *The Reality of the Church*, Wipf and Stock, New York, NY.