

Sermon 20 May 2018 Pentecost Sunday

John 15:26-27, 16:5-11 Acts 2:1-21

It was the day of Pentecost and the disciples, along with countless others, were gathered together. So let's first take a look at just what this day of Pentecost is.

Pentecost is one of the main Jewish festivals and people from near and far would converge on Jerusalem in order to celebrate it. The festival had two main significances. Firstly, it had an historical significance. It commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Secondly, it had an agricultural significance. It celebrated the beginning of the barley harvest.

It was a public holiday and the law stipulated that no work should be done. 'On the first day of the Festival of the Harvest, when you present the first of your new grain to the Lord, you must call a holy assembly of the people. None of your regular work must be done on that day.' *Numbers 28:21*. So that is why everyone was gathered together on this occasion.

What happened at Pentecost we really do not know for certain except that the disciples had an experience of the power of the Holy Spirit flowing into their beings such as they never had before. This was manifested in three ways; by a strong wind, tongues of fire, which appeared above their heads, and speaking in tongues. There is some uncertainty as to just what took place in terms of the speaking in tongues. Did they actually speak in languages foreign to them? Who knows. So many different languages were being spoken that it is hard to say.

What is undisputed is that they were definitely filled with the Holy Spirit. So who or what is the Holy Spirit? To answer that question we need to think of the two p's – the presence of God and the power of God.

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in us and also the power of God working in us. Some translations use the word *helper* in referring to the Holy Spirit, and in fact the word *help* is used in our reading from Romans. 'And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress.' *Romans 8:26*. Also, in our gospel reading Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the Counsellor. Another word for Counsellor is *helper*.

I find the word *helper* very useful. The Holy Spirit helps me in my faith. How? I feel the presence of God when I pray and the power of God when my prayers are answered. I feel the presence of God when I come to church and worship. I feel the presence and the power of God when I reach out to those in need. God uses us as his agents of love in the world. When Jesus asks us to love our neighbour, he is asking us to allow God to work through us in spreading healing, restoration, hope and love to people. That's how I believe God works – through people.

Anthony de Mello, Jesuit priest and spiritual teacher, in his book, 'The Song of the Bird', writes, "On the street I saw a small girl shivering in a thin dress, with little hope of a decent meal. I became angry and said to God, 'Why did you permit this?' God replied, 'I certainly did do something about it. I made you.'"

There are acts of kindness and service being carried out every day by people everywhere, including by you. That is the power of love at work. That is the power of God, the Holy Spirit at work.

So God is my helper. Actually, I would take it a step further and say that without God I am actually helpless. Let me demonstrate with this glove. On its own this glove is useless. If I ask the glove to pick up this pen, nothing is going to happen. But if I put my hand inside the glove, suddenly the glove takes on a life of its own. *Pick up pen, wiggle fingers*. My hand in the glove gives it a life force. God's Spirit in me is my life force. With God's Spirit in me, I am empowered, just like this glove becomes empowered when I put my hand into it.

I want to focus for a moment on another aspect of the Holy Spirit. If God is my life force, my spiritual aspect, he must also be my conscience. Someone once said, 'Conscience is God's presence in man.'

So what is conscience? Conscience provides an awareness, a sense of guilt when we transgress, when we fall short of the values we believe in. It is a sense that someone is watching us, and who is that someone? Is it ourselves or is it God? I don't think it matters. I think the two are very closely related. Let me tell you a story.

In the ancient world a wise teacher announced to his twelve students that he had two problems. The first was that he had to find a husband for his daughter, and according to the tradition of those days, it should be one of his students. The difficulty was that he couldn't decide which student would make the best husband.

The second problem was that he, as the father of the bride, would have to pay for a lavish wedding and also set up the couple in a new home with all the necessities. This was a great expense.

To solve both these problems, the teacher announced a contest. He asked his students to creep stealthily into the local village under cover of night and steal whatever they could, as long as no one saw them. Then they would bring all the goods back to the teacher. Whichever student stole the most would win his daughter, and all the stolen goods would go the happy couple.

The students were shocked that their teacher was asking them to steal. He was actually such a moral man. In those days, though, so important was the vow of obedience to one's teacher that they accepted the contest. Or perhaps they were just blinded by their desire for their teacher's very attractive daughter.

Over the next seven days the students snuck into the village at night, stole whatever they could, and brought it back to the teacher. Amazingly, no student got caught in the act. At the end of the week, the teacher assembled the students to announce the results.

'You have stolen so much,' said the teacher, 'enough for any couple to get a good start in life. Except for one of you, who has not brought back anything at all. Why not?'

The shy young student came forward and said, 'Because I had to follow your instructions, sir.'

'What do you mean? Did I not instruct you to steal and bring the goods back to me?'

'Yes, sir,' said the student, 'but you also said *as long as no one sees you*. I crept into many houses at 2.00am, when everyone was fast asleep. But every time I was about to steal something, I noticed someone was watching me. So I had to leave empty-handed, sir.'

'If everyone in the house was sleeping, than who was watching you?' asked the teacher.

'I was watching me, sir. I could see myself about to steal. That is why I took nothing.'

'Very good. Very good,' said the teacher. 'At least I have one wise student who has been listening to me all these years. All the rest of you nincompoops, take all the stolen goods back to their owners. They won't punish you. I told them about this contest two weeks ago. They were expecting you. That is why none of you were caught. And remember, whatever immoral act you do, someone will always see you, and that someone is yourself. Because you see it, you will feel bad and suffer.'

Now that student had a conscience, and that's what kept him honest. Who was watching him? Himself? God? I don't think it matters. I would put it to you that one is part of the other. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in us, and part of that presence is our conscience. Think about it. Think of the evil deeds carried out in our world each day. Do those responsible acknowledge God's presence in themselves? Not likely. Do those responsible have a conscience? Not likely.

The Holy Spirit is God's power working in us. That power guides, heals, strengthens, uplifts and helps. But it only works if we acknowledge it, if we tap into it.

A final word. Because the disciples were now filled with the Holy Spirit, they now had the power to go out and preach, teach, heal and baptize people in the name of Jesus. And so Pentecost is regarded as the beginning of our Church, or to put it another way, the birthday of our Church.

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