

Pentecost

(St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 4 June 1995)

What happened when the Holy Spirit came into the lives of the disciples of Jesus at Pentecost? What happens when the Holy Spirit comes into people's lives today? The Holy Spirit is peculiarly difficult, even impossible to pin down with ideas and definitions. Often when the Bible speaks of the Spirit it doesn't speak directly. It uses a whole variety of metaphors and images, in order to evoke for us something of what the Spirit means and does. If we reflect a little on some of these images of the Spirit, we can allow them to draw us into a deeper sense of what the Spirit does in our lives.

The first of these pictures of the Spirit is the one that the word "spirit" itself means. Both in Hebrew in the Old Testament and in Greek in the New Testament, the word that's used for the Holy Spirit is the ordinary word for breath. Our word "spirit" too originally meant breath, though we've forgotten that. The picture is of the breath as the principle of life. You know someone is alive because they're breathing. The Spirit is God's breath of life. The Spirit is the life God breathes into all living creatures to give them life. In the Old Testament, this is a thoroughly universal notion. All living things live by the breath of God, God's Spirit, that gives life to them all. Human beings and other living creatures are no different in this respect: in all of them the breath of life is God's Spirit. For example, the book of Job says

If God should take back his spirit to himself
and gather to himself his breath
all flesh would perish together
and all mortals return to dust (Job 34:14-15).

Life exists only because God, the source of all life, shares his Spirit with his creation.

In the New Testament, at Pentecost for example, we see the Spirit as the breath of *new* life from God, life renewed and enhanced, life delivered from death. On one occasion after the resurrection, when Jesus was with his disciples, John tells us he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). It was a little acted parable. The new life the risen Christ shares with his disciples is the breath of life he breathes into them.

The Spirit who comes at Pentecost is, of course, the same Spirit who animates all life. At Pentecost he comes to reconnect our lives with God, to revitalize life, to give us life in all its fullness. Unfortunately, people have all too often thought of spiritual life as some kind of rather ethereal, attenuated life, as though it were what you have when you stop living. But the Spirit is not life-denying; the Spirit is above all life-affirming. The Spirit's very nature is life. The new life the Spirit gives at Pentecost is precisely real life, everything life really should be. The Spirit brings our lives to life, puts life back into our deadened and dying lives, re-sources our lives from the God who is the source of all life.

And because the Spirit is life-giving and life-affirming, because the Spirit breathes in all that lives, this new life the Spirit gives at Pentecost doesn't cut us off from the life of God's creation. The Spirit doesn't take us into some special supernatural sphere where we no longer have anything to do with the ordinary life of God's world. Quite

the opposite. As the Spirit reconnects us with God, the source of life, so the Spirit reconnects us with all of life. Experiencing the Spirit as new life from God gives us a new love of life. It opens our eyes to see the Spirit of God in all life. It makes us *care* about life: that people are dying in Bosnia and Rwanda; that there are places where life is more like death than life; that in our own society life is becoming cheaper, less valued, disposed of almost casually at times; that unborn children are deprived of life without reason; and that whole species of life - dozens of them - become extinct every day because of our own one species' misuse of the earth. It always puzzles me that people can be passionate about some of these things and completely indifferent to others. In fact, they are all parts of what Pope John Paul recently called "the culture of death." Those who live by the Spirit of life cannot be indifferent to any of them.

So we could sum up this picture of the Spirit in this way:

The breath of life is the Spirit God breathes into our dead and dying lives,
 the Spirit who raises us to new life, makes us fully alive with the life of
 God,
 the Spirit who engages us in the great struggle of our time for life against
 the forces of death.

A second picture of the Spirit comes from the story of Pentecost itself. Everything started at Pentecost when the house where the disciples were gathered was filled with the sound of a great driving wind (Acts 2:2). That was the arrival of the Spirit, because again the very word "spirit" in the languages of the Bible means not only breath but also wind. This is well illustrated by Ezekiel's great vision of the valley of dry bones, in which the Spirit of God is depicted as wind which arrives and then enters the lifeless bodies, becoming in them the breath of life, so that they rise to new life (Ezek 37:9-10, 14). Similarly, when the early Christians talked about the Spirit, they couldn't help but think of breath and wind, because these were the ordinary meanings of the word they used.

So what is there about the wind that helps us to understand the Spirit of God? Jesus, in a little parable which uses the wind as a picture of the Spirit, says: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it come from or where it goes" (John 3:8). You can't see the wind; it's an invisible, mysterious force, but you can see its effects. It's unpredictable and it's uncontrollable. The wind is a movement which we cannot predict or control, which seems to come from nowhere, which affects things and carries things along with it in its movement.

So it is with the Spirit. One of the first things we have to learn about the Spirit of God is that the Spirit is not under our control. You can't catch the wind and direct it where you want it to go. You can't get control of the Spirit and channel it where you think it ought to be going. The church has always been tempted to try to do that, to confine the Spirit like a genie in a lamp that only the people who know the right magic words can dispense. I think we modern people are even more tempted to want to control the Spirit, because we are addicted to control. We think life is better the more we have it under control. Taking control of our lives is what it's all about. And there is a limited value in that. But it misses the fact that so much of what is really important in life is precisely what we do not control and cannot predict - what happens *to* us, the people we encounter, the situations that occur, the tragedies that

overtake us, the unexpected opportunities that come our way. It is very often in these unpredictable aspects of life that God meets us - sometimes forces himself on our attention because we wouldn't otherwise be noticing, sometimes pushes us in a direction we would never otherwise have thought of going.

So, to summarize this second picture of the Spirit:
 when our lives lack direction
 or when they are all too firmly set in the wrong direction,
 then the wind of God's Spirit,
 sometimes a gentle breeze, sometimes a great hurricane,
 always a movement we cannot predict or control,
 sweeps into our lives
 catches us up in its movement
 takes us out of ourselves
 and takes us where God is going.

Another picture of the Spirit which is very common indeed in the Bible is the Spirit as water. This is used in a lot of different ways. For example, the image of being "filled" with the Spirit, frequent in the New Testament, is of people as vessels, filled to the brim with the liquid of the Spirit. To be "baptised" with the Spirit is, literally, to be plunged into a bath of Spirit, or, perhaps, to be deluged with Spirit pouring down on one as in a shower. But here we shall focus on just one of the uses of this picture of the Spirit as water. Peter in his sermon at Pentecost said that what was happening then was what happens when God *pours out* the Spirit (Acts 2:17, 33). That's a picture of God pouring the Spirit down on us like rain from heaven. To appreciate this image we need to think of rain as Palestinian farmers knew it: rain falling on the dry ground to make it fertile and fruitful. Isaiah has God saying:

I will pour water on the thirsty land
 and streams on the dry ground.

I will pour my Spirit on your descendants (Isa 44:3).

And another passage in Isaiah, foreseeing the future, speaks of a time when the Spirit from on high is be poured out on us,
 and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field (Isa 32:15).

The Spirit is the rain that falls on our lives to water them so that they can bear fruit. This is also the picture Paul has in mind when he talks about the fruit of the Spirit: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). All those qualities of Christian life are the fruits we bear when the Spirit waters the soil of our lives, vitalizes it, makes it fertile and fruitful for God.

So, to sum up this third picture of the Spirit:
 The Spirit comes into our lives as gentle refreshing rain
 to water our parched lives
 and to make our barren lives blossom and fruit.

The fourth and final picture is of the Spirit as fire. At Pentecost, when the house filled with the noise of the great hurricane, the other thing the disciples noticed was a flame of fire, shaped like a tongue, resting on each of them (Acts 2:3).

This is best understood as the fire of God's passionate love. The Spirit brings God's love into our lives, and God's love is not just some kind of bland benevolence. God

doesn't just wish us well and want to be nice to us. God loves us passionately. God's love is a flame which burns with passionate concern. And, as fire does, it sets other things alight. As it burns into our lives it kindles a flame of love in each of us. It sets us on fire with love for God and for all God loves.

And lest we run away with the impression that experiencing the Spirit is all rather exciting and uplifting and fun, the fire reminds us that there is pain involved too. Fire hurts and purges. Passionate love involves pain, as our English word "passion," with its double meaning of intense love and intense suffering, itself reminds us.

This image of the Spirit as fiery passion is important for us. What afflicts a great many people in our society is a kind of apathy: the sense that there is nothing really worth caring very much about, nothing worth devoting oneself to, nothing worth giving oneself to unreservedly, nothing to be passionate about. People have come to be cynical about all great causes, sceptical about real and inspiring meaning in life. All one can hope to do with life is amuse oneself. It's not difficult to catch that cultural mood. So we constantly need the Spirit to warm our cold hearts with the flame of God's love, to rekindle in us the passion without which life is not worth living - the fire of devotion to God and the fire of passionate concern for all that God cares about.