

The Ever-Empowering God

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 27 May 2012, by David Gill. Readings for the Day of Pentecost were Acts 2:1-21 and St John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Pentecost! The Holy Spirit descends upon the church – and, by happy coincidence, that confounded scaffolding at long last has descended from the front of St Stephen's. Truly, this is a day to rejoice!

But forget the scaffolding. Focus instead on that extraordinary day of Pentecost.

Just weeks before, Jesus had been executed. His followers were still trying to make sense of all that had happened.

Now that fledgling Christian community finds itself caught up in a big public event. Pentecost was an important Jewish festival, falling fifty days after Passover – hence “Pentecost”, the Greek word for fiftieth. Part harvest festival, part a commemoration of Moses having received the Torah on Mount Sinai, it was a time of gathering, remembering, celebrating.

In the midst of the festival, something vital, formative even, happens to those early Christians. In later centuries, some would call this the birth day of the church. Precisely what happened is hard to say, because the record we have is all dressed up with drama and symbolism. But it revolved around their amazed discovery of the empowering, uniting, life-giving Spirit of God.

The account we heard this morning, from the Acts of the Apostles, sounds like the script for a Hollywood blockbuster: noises in the heavens, tongues of fire touching everyone present, a crowd gathering, excitement spreading, all of them bursting into a babel of languages to talk about what God was doing, the amazed question: what does this mean? Then an excited sermon from Peter, and the baptism of about three thousand people.

Something decisive happened. Just what is hard to say. When it happened is unclear too.

The Acts story focuses the gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. John's gospel, in a later chapter, suggests the Spirit was given by the risen Lord on the day of his rising. But let's not waste time haggling about details. The "what" and the "when" don't much matter. Both Acts and the fourth gospel are telling us about much more than a far-off historical event. What matters for us is not the "*what*" or the "*when*" but the "*why*" – why are these references to the Spirit given such weight and why are they important for us?

They were important then, and they're important now, because they suggest the church doesn't just have a memory of events long past. It is imbued with a divine presence, no less. The God glimpsed in Jesus was with those early Christians in a new way, breathing life into his people, breaking down their divisions, guiding them in the way they should go.

And the God glimpsed in Jesus is with us in the same way.

Good news indeed! Yet, even at the best of times, this is a discovery we tend to forget. Belief in the Holy Spirit may be universally affirmed by all Christians. It is almost as universally undermined by the way Christians behave. A church's doctrine may be impeccably correct. Church practice is where again and again we fall short.

In 1991, Australia hosted a big assembly of the World Council of Churches. Its theme was "Come Holy Spirit". Sounds good! But when it was all over, one of the participants made a telling criticism. People seemed so engrossed in their own agendas, so preoccupied with their own interests, he said, that we did not seem serious about seeking the Spirit's lead. A fair comment, I think. One that applies to most gatherings of most churches.

It is so perilously easy to forget that the church derives its life and direction from God, not us.

Watch the lobbying when important leaders have to be chosen. Observe the politicking when contentious policies are being determined. There are even reports -- from another denomination -- of factions being organized and how-to-vote cards circulated. It sounds more like parliament than Pentecost!

The Uniting Church, to be fair, has tried hard to get its decision-making right. Even so, we get hung up on a common misunderstanding. Whenever the church adopts a controversial policy or launches a contentious program, our leaders must brace themselves for protests that “what you have decided doesn’t reflect *my view* as a church member or *our view* as a congregation!” Of course, it’s not the role of a synod or the National Assembly to seek and respond to our views. Its job, rather, is to seek and respond to the leading of God. Which may be a very different thing!

Yes, when it comes to belief in the Holy Spirit it is so easy for us to become practical heretics. Even at the best of times. And right now, for the churches of Australia at any rate, is certainly not the best of times.

You know the difficulties. I won’t spell them out. When times are tough, we reach out for solutions. That’s natural. But sometimes we reach for phony solutions.

There’s the lure of *novelty*. Protestants, more than our Orthodox, Catholic or Anglican friends, too easily assume that innovation is the key to spiritual renewal. If something is new it must be good. If it’s old, scrap it. Embrace Hillsong, forget plainsong! But life isn’t that simple. Nor is faith. Renewal that is truly of God entails a return to the sources of life, not their replacement.

There’s the lure of better *management*. Gerald Kennedy, a Methodist bishop in the United States, once commented that “the United Methodist Church is so well organized that it will flourish in the USA long after Christianity has ceased to exist!” True, the church is an organization, it needs efficient management, but heaven help us if we think more streamlined systems are going to save us.

There’s the lure of *accommodation*, of trimming the church’s message to offer what Australia today seems to want. Go light on worship and doctrine, play up instead the fellowship and social service. But that track has no integrity for the church, and I think misunderstands humanity’s deepest needs.

Where are we to turn for the renewal the church today so desperately needs? If I had the answer to that I’d run for Pope, but here are four things to ponder with care.

First, *God never abandons his church*. Oh yes, the long centuries past have brought tough times aplenty, many a lot tougher than this one. During those times Christians have experienced Pentecost not just once but repeatedly. Remember those experiences of spiritual empowerment and renewal: the great monastic movements of the early centuries and the middle ages, the movements of renaissance and reform in the western church, the Wesleyan revival, the Catholic renewal symbolised by Vatican II, the ecumenical movement of which we are part. That selection just scratches the surface. For some strange reason, it seems, God never gives up on us.

Second, renewal that is truly of God is *always Jesus-shaped*. Be wary of any self-centred spirituality, any gospel that promises prosperity, any scheme that would have us promoting distrust or division. The way of Christ is always the way of love. And along that way there is always a cross.

Third, authentic renewal *always surprises*. We may appoint planning committees by the bus load. We may redraft our mission statements until the office printers run dry. We may devise the most impressive programs, convinced beyond doubt that we've nailed exactly what is needed. But God's ways are not our ways. Be prepared to be surprised, be very surprised!

Fourth, renewal that is of God is exactly that – *a gift*, something that comes from beyond ourselves. We may yearn for it. We may pray for it. We may clear away obstacles to it. We may receive and celebrate it. But we never create it. One of the practices I've learned from charismatic and Pentecostalist friends is the gesture of the open hands. The symbol of confidence, need, trust. And utter dependence. In that faith, today, we pray ...

Come, Holy Spirit! Renew the life of your church. And kindle within us the fire of your love. Amen