

11 May 2008 Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-21; John 20: 19-23

Sitting down to write this sermon I remembered an essay I had to write in my student days. Question: Is there a consistent theology of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament? Just the kind of thing to make your heart sink. In fact the answer is no, but it's all the more fascinating for that.

The Spirit is there, page one, Day One: The Spirit of God broods over the face of the waters before anything else is. It's the energy that somehow turns the Word of God – “God spoke” – into the acts of God – “and it was so”. This is the ruach, the breath of God, a mighty wind that makes things happen.

In Exodus the Spirit of God is given to a man called Bezalel so that he's equipped with artistic gifts for the building of the ark: I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs and to work in gold and silver...

The Spirit of course anoints and grabs and empowers the prophets, fills them with fire and probably made them impossible to live with. But God also sends an evil spirit into Saul when his time is up, leaving you with an uncomfortable sense that there's something wild and undomesticated about this energy of God. Definitely more a lion's roar than a pussy cat's purr, so we'd better watch out.

When Ezekiel has his vision of Israel's dry bones re clothed in flesh it's the Spirit that does the work: I will put my Spirit within you and you will live. When Jesus outs himself as Messiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, it's Isaiah's words he uses: The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me. And this morning, when Peter wants to explain why the disciples are behaving like they've just emerged from some kind of all-night rave – drunk at nine o'clock in the morning, he reaches back into the Old Testament for his explanation. This is what Joel said: I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.

So the Spirit of God manifests in all sorts of ways, as Holy Wisdom (described interestingly in the feminine) as artistry, and energy and zeal and a literally untameable power.

T.S. Eliot really gets this when he writes: “The Dove descending breaks the air with flame of incandescent terror”. This is light blue touch paper then retire to a safe distance if you can. Because to open your life to this radical energy is a genuinely scary thing to do.

Archbishop William Temple completely understood this. He wrote: “When we pray, Come Holy Ghost, we had better know what we are about. He will not carry us to easy triumphs of gratifying successes. He may take us through loneliness, desertion by friends, apparent desertion even by God; that was the way Christ went to the Father. If we invoke him, we must be ready for the glorious pain of being caught by his power out of our petty orbit into the eternal purposes of the Almighty, in whose outward sweep our lives are as a speck of dust. The soul that is filled with the Spirit must have been purged of all pride and self-reliance; but that soul has found the only real dignity, the only lasting joy. Come then, Great Spirit, come. Convict the world; and convict my timid soul”.

But you know, scary as this might sound, I think this is the kind of God people actually want. Last Sunday, which was the 4th of May, just after Church I received a text from my eldest daughter that read: Happy Star Wars Day, Dad. May the Fourth be with you. Being more than a little dim, it took me a moment to get the pun. But in fact this is how lots of people today want to think about God: May the Force be with you. At the time of the last census enough people declared themselves to be Jeddai, followers of the Force if you like, for this to be recognised as an actual religion.

But if what we're looking for is an undomesticated positive energy, a power of creativity and goodness that sustains and animates all things then that is what God's Holy Spirit is. A few weeks ago I went to see the Ansel Adams photography exhibition at the City Art Centre and there was one photograph of a blade of grass that had forced its way up through a crack in a concrete pavement. That's the energy of God's irrepressible

Spirit in all things. Adams' amazing artistic perception sees beauty and power and majesty in everything from a mountain crag to a weathered fence post, because the Spirit of God animates everything – we just need to pause, and breathe (because breath is Spirit) and know it.

Thirty years ago there was a kind of reawakening to the living presence of the Spirit in the Church – in the Charismatic Renewal. I can remember attending Catholic renewal days where there'd be a thousand people, all singing in tongues – including the gravely voiced Cardinal Gray and the rest of the hierarchy. The renewal movement pretty much petered out, but in its wake it left a renewed sense of prayer, a renewed valuing of the healing ministry as something that didn't just die with the early church, and a real reawakening to what's possible when we believe in the Spirit of God that just crackles with creative energy and makes things happen – we may not see those tongues of fire, but they are definitely there.

And what I want to say is that this is the God we need. Not dull, not safe, never predictable. A God as exciting and scary and wondrous and terrifying and beautiful as life is. Not a God of easy answers, but a God who is somehow at the heart of all our questions and insecurities and inconsistencies. It's often said that the Acts of the Apostles should really be called the acts of the Holy Spirit because nowhere is the Spirit mentioned more – it's the Spirit that sends the apostles time and again to new places and frightening places, and makes them grow and grows the Church too. Today we rejoice that the Acts of the Holy Spirit is a book we're still writing, and there's no telling where the Spirit might send you next. Amen.