

Pentecost
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Acts 2.1-11

Ps 104

1 Cor 12.3b-7&12-13

John 20.19-23

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In the Appalachian mountains in the United States, there are groups of snake-handling Christians, who believe that handling poisonous snakes and not being bitten is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. There are other people who laugh in the Spirit, run laps around churches in the Spirit, and even do press ups in the aisle in the power of the Holy Spirit. A quick YouTube search, and the Holy Spirit will provide you with some serious entertainment!

I do not wish to judge or ridicule any particular group, the truth is we're people, and all people can be pretty weird. I just want to make the point that reference to the Holy Spirit can mean quite a lot of things to a lot people, and on Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, and what some call the birth of the Church, we might want to step back and think about what we mean when we confess to believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of Life.

What might hit closer to home than Appalachian snake-handlers, is the use of the Holy Spirit to justify self-righteousness, and as a pressure point to coercion: 'If only those people had the Holy Spirit—like *me*—then maybe they wouldn't live like *that*'. Or maybe as a test-case for one's faith: 'Oh, you doubt, or your faith doesn't look like mine, you lack the Holy Spirit'.

This perspective in itself shows a lack of the Spirit. Faith should be a gift of *joy*, not a cause of pressure or anxiety. We don't need tests for each other's status of holiness, or games of spiritual coercion. If that were the work of the Spirit we would be better off without it.

What we need is to learn how to love. And love is exactly what is on offer in the gift of the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit is always the gift of the self-giving love of Jesus Christ.

John's Gospel helps us out quite a bit here. Jesus has told his disciples that he is going to send to them the Spirit as an Advocate; that the Spirit will take what is his and share it with them; that the Spirit bears witness to him; and that Jesus will remain with his disciples through the Spirit who was coming to them. And here, in our reading today, John writes that Jesus *breathes* the Holy Spirit upon them.

It is as if John is telling us that in the gift of the Spirit, the very life of Christ, the air that fills his lungs, becomes *ours*.

This means that there is a particularity of this Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not some general divine force—like something out of a Star Wars film—, this is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The Spirit bears witness to, points to Christ, because the Spirit continually re-presents the self-giving love of Christ's crucifixion to us. But the Spirit does not just communicate, the Spirit is not Jesus' spokesman. In the Spirit, the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ *remains present* in our world.

Jesus *is* the perfect love of God lived out in the world—we see what God's love is like when it is embodied in our humanity in the life of Jesus Christ. So the work of the Spirit, that Spirit *breathed* into the life of Jesus'

followers, is the continued presence of that perfect love. God's love continues to be *real*, present, and active in us and among us just as in the life of Jesus.

This is a world, however, where people become commodities for the sordid ends of other people, where the powerful use the weak for their own gain, and where love at times grows tired and weak even in our deepest relationships; a world in which we become more and more skeptical of others' abilities to love, and maybe of our own.

This is a world where bombs in crowded spaces and speeding vans on bridges are tragic, but old news, a daily occurrence throughout our desensitised world.

So what can it mean in this world where love seems so sparse, that the living presence of God's love in Christ pervades the world through the Holy Spirit?

This dilemma is not lost on Jesus. He comes to his disciples and declares peace to them, 'Peace be with you', he says. But the peace that Jesus offers is not one that avoids conflict or suffering or hardship, it is not one that has escaped our cynicism and the frailty of our love.

'Peace be with you. When he had said this, he showed to them his hands and his side', the text says. 'Peace be with you', says Jesus, but as he brings this peace he reveals to them his *wounds*.

Wounds which have passed through suffering and death, wounds of heinous, senseless violence, wounds of the rejected, the outcast, the lonely, the hated, the scapegoat of human sin and arrogance and prejudice, now

have come into the new life of resurrection, have now entered a new creation, and are bringing peace to the world.

'When you send forth your Spirit (or *breath*), they are created; and you renew the face of the earth', the Psalmist proclaims. And here we see the beginnings of the Spirit's new creation in the risen life of Christ.

And now Christ *breathes* his Spirit upon *us*, so that the same grace and mercy, the same forgiveness and love by which he lives can become ours, too. And so that there is nothing we can do or that can happen in this life that can overcome God's love for us that has met us in Christ; so that the wounds of our own lives can begin to see the healing love that God offers even now.

Christ's words as he breathes on the disciples 'receive the Holy Spirit', are words which speak purely and only of *love*.

In Jesus Christ, perfect love has met us in our weakness, in our joy, in our sorrow, in our pain and frustration, so that every aspect of our being now finds its home in God's embrace, and through the Holy Spirit, nothing and no one escapes God's love.

And that indescribable, invincible love is continually present to us through the glory of Pentecost. So that though we may never recognise the Spirit in snake-handling, or a preacher being understood at once in a dozen different languages, the Spirit is recognised in something yet more miraculous: in that the perfect, divine love that Jesus lived in our world can now become our love, too; in that we become the ones spending our lives for the good of the poor and the outcast, in that we become the ones to love and embrace the unloved and rejected, in that we become forgivers of all kinds of sins against us, in that we begin to live out the self-giving love

of Jesus Christ as he says to us: 'As my Father has sent me, so I am sending you'.

We are sitting somewhere between our given, created life and our future re-created, glorified life in resurrection, and the Spirit—the breath of God that created all things—is breathing us into the new creation.