

Sermon for Pentecost

Text: John 20:19-23

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,
Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

This joyful cry leads us beautifully into our Pentecost celebrations. As part of God's magnificent plan of making peace throughout the whole creation, Christ's resurrection is followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Each of the readings today tell us something about the gift and the work of the Holy Spirit, giving us a taste for the richness of the Spirit's activity. It's wonderful that we hear four Bible readings each Sunday. The four readings we've heard today, from Psalms, Acts, 1 Corinthians and the gospel of John each tell us something different. This is wonderful because it shows us how diverse and generous God's outpouring of the Holy Spirit is.

We're taught not to become trapped in a prescriptive and limited understanding of how the Holy Spirit is given and what the Spirit does. For example, it would be quite wrong to say that the Spirit hasn't come to a person, or group of people, if there is no sound of rushing wind, or tongues of flame, or speaking in tongues. We hear about those dramatic signs as Acts chapter two describes the day of Pentecost. Later in chapter 2 we read how 3000 people were convicted by what they heard and, we believe, prompted by the Holy Spirit to repentance and baptism.

However, Acts chapter two is not everything that the book of Acts, let alone the Bible, says about the Holy Spirit.

For example, in our psalm for this day (Psalm 140), we sang about God's abundant, overflowing, joyful, playful creative activity, where the Spirit is very much involved in creating and sustaining life, in quite a concrete way. Instead of trying to limit God's activity, the psalmist simply stands in awe of God's wondrous and ongoing work of creating and sustaining all that exists, even some things that we're not so sure about, like the Leviathan frolicking in the ocean.

For another example, there's John's gospel, which has no fire or rushing wind to signal the presence and work of God. The gospel reading we heard today is a section of the same gospel reading that we heard on the second Sunday of Easter. On that Sunday we tend to be captivated by the action involving Thomas. Today the focus is on Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We clearly heard about the risen Lord Jesus himself, God in the midst of the disciples, who breathed on them and said "receive the Holy Spirit". In both the gospel of John and in the book of Acts it is clearly God who gives his Holy Spirit to the church. Jesus and the Father send the Spirit so that God's mission to the world will be carried on as the church's mission to the world.

It's helpful to hear these different accounts which have both obvious differences and important similarities. We can be encouraged to notice that in both the reading from Acts and John's gospel, the Holy Spirit is given to empower God's mission through the church. In both cases the proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus' name is central. In Acts we heard Peter's pithy sermon using the book of Joel, when he proclaimed that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. The same wonderful, gracious message is contained in Jesus' instructions to the disciples when he said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."(John 20:23)

The heart of the work of the church is to go out and tell the news that reconciliation has been won. Jesus has taken away the sin of the world. In Jesus there is peace. God is bringing everything into harmony in Jesus, and we have been baptised into Jesus. The Spirit empowers us to live in this wonderful truth, trusting completely in Jesus' death and resurrection, and sharing this wonderful news in word and deed.

Jesus has given us the Spirit so that everything we say and do becomes a proclamation of the good news of God's salvation.

We've already mentioned God's overflowing creative genius. The beauty of God's outpouring of the Spirit is the sheer diversity which works for a common goal. St Paul teaches us that we all have the same Spirit, but we are not all the same.

The basic gift is the gift of faith, which allows us to live confessing and trusting Jesus as our Lord, the Lord.

But then the wondrous diversity opens up. St Paul writes,

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of

activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”(1 Cor 12:4-7)

There are many gifts with one overarching goal and purpose.

What a wonderful insight it is, to realise that the working of the Spirit doesn't look the same in each Christian, and it doesn't need to look the same. The working of the Spirit is not the same from Christian to Christian. We can expect differences; differences which add to the health and richness of the body; differences which reflect God's unstoppable creative genius.

Our differences are a reason for rejoicing. These differences are evidence of the presence and working of the Spirit.

Fully in keeping with God's wonderful creativity is a church full of people of different abilities doing different activities. We can rejoice in our differences. We can rejoice that the Father and the Son have poured out the Spirit so richly on the whole church, including us.

It's true that, from time to time, there have been profound signs and activities in conjunction with the Spirit's presence, but mostly the Spirit's work is to build up the body of Christ in all sorts of ways that people easily overlook. The activities of the Spirit are for the building up of the body, as St Paul wrote *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”*

Today we're encouraged when we hear that Jesus gives us the Spirit so that we can proclaim his forgiveness, an essential part of building up the body. He's not saying that you or I can decide on whether or not we forgive other people. That would be to jump out of the story and to pretend that we're God. No, Jesus does something very important so that we trust that we are forgiven and can live in a good relationship with God and each other.

Jesus gives his church the authority to declare that sins are forgiven. We have the privilege and responsibility of telling people, including one another, that sin is forgiven. When someone confesses their sin, we can declare confidently: Your sin is forgiven for Christ's sake. The Holy Spirit helps us to trust in that forgiveness and to live in it. We have peace with God. The barrier is gone. Jesus has taken our sin away.

There is another side to that message. Since Christ's work is so wonderful and complete, it's not to be taken lightly or ignored, and we might sometimes have to tell people that they are not forgiven. Who

would that be, we might wonder? Certainly not any despairing sinner, since forgiveness comes from Jesus and isn't dependent on us pulling our socks up by ourselves. It might come as a shock to realize that those who may need to hear that their sin is not forgiven are the proud and self-righteous, who are often seen as 'good people', like the Pharisees, who considered that they had little that needed to be forgiven. Jesus wants everyone to turn to him and accept his gracious forgiveness – that includes you and me. In turn, he sends us to proclaim God's mercy in the power of the Spirit.

Today, we rejoice in the gift of the Spirit's presence and work. We rejoice in the rich and diverse activities of the Spirit among us. We rejoice in God's manifold creative works that are evident in the creation and in the church.

Let us rejoice in his creative, life-giving presence, knowing that God's Spirit is at work in us.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.