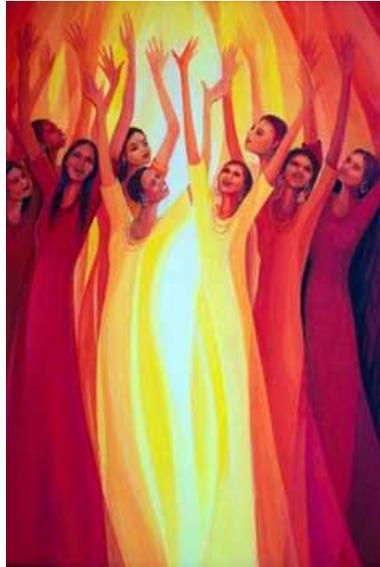


Holy Spirit Come

***Blow winds of change, breathe in our lives
Stir in our hearts, shine through our eyes
Come and pour out your gifts, work through our hands
And renew the face of this land***
(Contemporary Hymn, Holy Spirit Come)

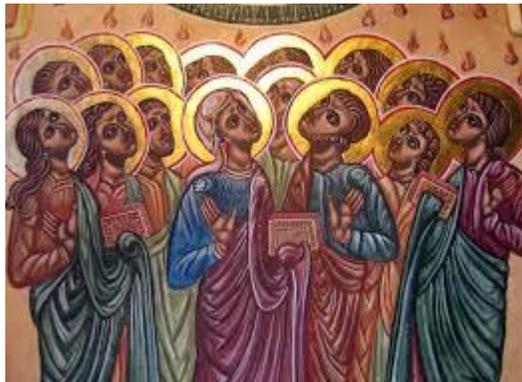


Imagine a group of people, faithful followers of the Jewish teacher Jesus, having witnessed his arrest, trial and execution, felt the deep sorrow, shock and fear of that terrible event, their hopes dashed in the darkness of that apparent ending, and then, his presence among them again, giving them courage and stirring their hearts with hope and, finally, strengthened and filled with a power that literally drove them out into the world – to teach, to spread this good news, to heal, guide, encourage, to do all that we know to be the work of the Church. This presence and power, the Holy Spirit, is something Jesus had spoken about, something he had promised he would give them and which would teach and inspire them, and most importantly would send them out into the world in his name to do everything – and more in fact - that he himself had done. This is the Pentecost story and it is what we celebrated last Sunday.

We find this story in the New Testament, in the Book of The Acts of the Apostles, chapter two. It is considered to be the story of the birth of the Church. Pentecost means ‘the fiftieth day’ and comes from the Greek name for the Feast of Weeks, an ancient Jewish Feast celebrating the giving of the Law. This Feast is still celebrated in Judaism and is called *Shavuot*. As the

fiftieth day after Easter in the Christian calendar it is also a Christian Feast celebrating the 'descent' of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and other followers of Jesus. This is the story:

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine’ “.



Well, what exactly is this Holy Spirit and what are its effects? The first thing we notice in the story is that it is a power that unites and makes communication and understanding possible. Under the influence of the Spirit, the story says, they began to speak in many languages so that all people could understand what they were saying. And what was the message they heard? “In our own language we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power”. In other words, the Spirit’s presence and power open up a world of awareness and insight, of ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’. The Spirit brings a new consciousness. According to the story, however, not everyone was impressed and not everyone ‘heard’ or ‘saw’. Some of the onlookers explained it away by saying, “they are filled with new wine”. But in response to this, Peter got up and delivered a most eloquent speech, attesting to the power of God in Jesus and making the connection between this power of God in Jesus and the power they now received and of which they saw a visible manifestation. Jesus has now poured out this Spirit so that you hear and

believe, he told them. He exhorted them to repent and be baptized and in this purified and open state he assured them that they too would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And then a few lines later we hear of the effects of the Spirit upon the lives of those people living under its influence: awe, care for one another, concern for those in need, joy, thanksgiving, prayer and praise. And, we are told, they continued the practice of 'breaking bread at home', which was the first thing the followers of Jesus had begun to do.

It is the story of this Spirit that we can trace throughout Scripture. In the very first line of the Book of Genesis, the first Book of the Bible, we read that the Spirit of God was moving on the waters, bringing order out of chaos, bringing the Divine into relationship with creation, working upon, bringing into being, moulding and shaping creation. It is often translated as a 'wind from God'. The Spirit in the world, interacting with creation, is at the very beginning of our religious story, our religious worldview. And so the story continues. The prophets of ancient Israel spoke and acted under the influence of this Spirit. This same Spirit is described as overshadowing Mary, streaming into her being. And she gave birth to Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of this Spirit, and Jesus himself sends this Spirit, passes this on, to all who believe: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'. Now he said this about the Spirit which believers in him were to receive, for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7: 37 – 39). It is at this point in our religious story that the Spirit is understood as intimately linked to, flowing from, and sent into the world by Jesus. So when we look at the story of the presence of the Holy Spirit we see that it is a presence in our universe, in human development, given total and free expression in Jesus. Later, in our unfolding religious story, St Paul tells us that there is one Spirit, many people, but one Spirit. It is what unites us, draws us together, it is the 'place' beyond the divisions that we create. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is what gives us our identity, for as St Paul says, we are temples of God's Spirit, we are earthen jars that hold this treasure.

Australian theologian, Michael Morwood, in *Praying A New Story*, speaks of the Spirit emerging into visibility – in space, in galaxies, in gases, in atoms, and so on, in the first life-forms on earth, in diversity, in the first humans, in the development of language and ideas and culture, in the search for meaning, in the development of wisdom, and then of course on through our own particular biblical story, and so to Jesus, who embodied this fully and shows us what we can become when we let the Spirit have its way with us, when we let it work freely in our own lives. This idea is found in the magnificent writings of the twentieth century Jesuit palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin. In his essay, *My Universe*, he says that God's Spirit is what holds everything together in the world; it is the continuous unifying force that we live in. And within this grand and awe-inspiring sweep of the story of the Spirit we learn from and through Jesus that in particular when we love we are letting this Spirit have its way with us.

The Holy Spirit is the great agent of possibility. The Spirit draws us beyond the confines within which we imagine we exist and the confines we ourselves create. It gives us vision and courage. Whenever we are enabled to break out of tired and lacklustre ways of thinking and being and doing, so that the vision and example of Jesus may become incarnated in and through us, we are seeing evidence of the Spirit at work in our lives. Jesus' life was spent living and preaching about possibility and he constantly invited people to grow into it. He invited people into the possibility of peace, forgiveness, love, healing and wholeness. When we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit we become people of possibility. In the Liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation, we find these words: "Your Spirit changes our hearts: enemies begin to speak to one another, those who were estranged join hands in friendship, and nations seek the way of peace together. Your spirit is at work when understanding puts an end to strife, when hatred is quenched by mercy, and vengeance gives way to forgiveness". This is why Pope Francis, at the beginning of his pontificate, invited Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas to pray with him at the Vatican, to offer their thinking and decision-making to the shaping and moulding of the Spirit of God. He called on these two leaders to "break the spiral of hatred and violence" and "begin a new journey towards peace in the Middle East". He called on them to find "the strength to persevere undaunted in dialogue". We know and believe we need God's help, he said. He invited them into possibility, beyond the present horizons, the possibility of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the great dreamer, the great inspirer of dreams. Pope Francis himself is a man attentive to the Spirit, listening to its promptings and taking risks. His exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), expounds this vision. More than once in the document he exclaims, "I have a dream"! This is a dream full of inspiration and also full of courage. His dream is for a church filled with the joy of the Lord. It is a dream for a missionary church, a church that goes out to the world, to the most vulnerable and to those in need, and brings life to them, the life and light that come from friendship with Jesus. His vision is of a Church of mercy, a welcoming church. This is indeed a new vision for the Church of recent times although for many this has never ceased to be a dream for the Church. In the papacy of Benedict XVI we heard of his dream for a 'smaller, purer church', a church more doctrinally pure. But Francis dreams of a messy church, with its sleeves rolled up, out on the streets, unafraid to welcome in those on the margins, those who are not in fact doctrinally pure. Which dream is indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit? Well, all we need do is turn to Jesus for that answer: are our dreams consistent with what he taught and how he lived? And given that Jesus lived and taught love, that is our benchmark. We find in him a refrain of love rather than doctrinal purity – in fact he cautioned against that at the expense of love. "By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another" (John 13:35), he said. Of course, this love will always include an invitation to self-awareness and to a choice to live better, but love and welcome and inclusivity are always the context. And then of course there is that wonderful exclamation we

find in the letter of John: “God is love and everyone who lives in love lives in God and God lives in them” (1John 4:16). So we need to ‘test the spirits’ as the saying goes. We need to discern whether we are truly inspired by the Holy Spirit or whether our dreams and plans are proceeding from some other place or some other agenda.

So what exactly does a life lived under the influence of the Holy Spirit look like? “We cannot sense the Spirit, like we cannot see air, silence, and the space between everything. We look for God ‘out there’ and the Spirit is always ‘in here’ and ‘in between’ everything”, says the Franciscan spiritual writer Richard Rohr. So to get an idea of what this Spirit ‘in here’ looks like we turn to St Paul. Paul has a rich teaching on this topic in several of his letters, but the heart of it is that the Spirit sanctifies, makes pure, and spiritually enriches. The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of this spiritual enrichment as gifts and names seven of them: wisdom, understanding, right judgement, courage, knowledge, reverence and wonder or awe. They all have to do with our inner being, our sense of God and our stance towards God. So the Holy Spirit shapes our inner being. These are the spiritual characteristics that mark us, the ‘in here’ of the Spirit. Paul also speaks of the fruits of the Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit are what we see, the qualities that come to visible expression in and through those who live in openness and surrender to God’s Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22). When we see kindness expressed, for example, we recognize that that is an expression of the Holy Spirit in the world. Paul exhorts us to “live by the Spirit”. We need the gifts of the Spirit so that we can produce the fruit! Those who are not of religious persuasion and in fact even some of those who are, often look around and claim to see no evidence of God in the world at all. I wonder what they are looking for. Wherever we see those fruits of the Spirit, God is there!

Sister Deirdre Rofe ibvm was a much loved Loreto sister who died in 2002. In his book, *A Canopy of Stars*, Fr Chris Gleeson sj has an excerpt from the homily given by another Jesuit, Peter Steel, at Sister Deirdre’s Requiem Mass. He said: “She was above all a God seeker: a tracer of his many signs in her milieu – in her world, in her work, in her relationships. One of the things which made her so deeply attractive was her evident sense that there was more to common events and circumstances than their ordinary face: and that ‘more’ was good, and promising and fertile. She spoke and acted, and indeed she looked, as if life was a sponsored thing, and as if each day was a sponsored day ... Deirdre quite certainly believed that we are courted by God ... and all the time, as it was and is my pleasure to read her, this kind of miming of what was being done in her by that spirited one whom we call the ‘Holy Spirit’. Whenever she starred, as often she did, the gleaming of God was showing through”.

This is a very lovely description of a life marked by the Spirit, a woman whose interior life was shaped by God and who gave expression to this in the reality of her days. What Peter Steele

says about Deirdre has all those qualities of the Spirit: living with possibility, living with promise, living in the horizon of Divine Presence. His expression of living 'as if life was a sponsored thing' is just marvelous. To be 'sponsored' is to be provided for, and life is indeed provided for by God, each day is provided for by God. We ourselves in the very depths of our own make-up are provided for by God. But how do we move from assenting to this intellectually, to living it each day?

At the heart of all authentic spirituality is surrender. We need to live in communion with the Mystery of God from within. Speaking of the Spirit which was to be given to believers, Jesus said: "If anyone thirst, let that person come to me and drink". So we are invited to 'drink' of the Spirit first of all, to be satiated, filled, to have our thirsting, our searching and restlessness for what deeply matters and fulfills, satisfied. Paul has much to say about this in his letter to the Romans: the Spirit is "poured out into our hearts", he says, and "we are given to drink of the one Spirit". As we drink of the Spirit we will be transformed. The Holy Spirit instills courage, for as Paul says, "you have not received a spirit of slavery". Words such as slavery and bondage imply a diminished life, but in contrast the Spirit enables us to see possibility beyond the moment and beyond all that hems us in and saps life from us. And so, little by little, as this becomes our regular practice, our assent to the Spirit's presence will move from our head to our heart, into the depths of who we are and how we are.

This image of the living water we are invited to drink is powerful and inspiring and Jesus' words remind me of the vision of the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel. In the Book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Scriptures, Ezekiel describes his vision of water flowing from the Temple, on all sides, swelling and forming a river. The river flows down into the sea and, says Ezekiel, "when it enters the sea, the sea of stagnant waters, the water will become fresh ... everything will live where the river goes ... on the banks on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing" (Ezekiel 47). This description of the living water flowing from the Temple is highly symbolic of course – the Temple in Jerusalem, the holy city, was the place where the Divine Presence resided on earth, and from this place comes life and fruit and healing. Everything will live where the river goes! And so it is for us in that invitation to drink of the Spirit. In Jesus is the fullness of God, and from this sanctuary, this place of the Divine Presence, flows the Spirit which he promised to send and which brings life, heals and produces fruit.

The Spirit is a holy enabler for it empowers us to follow Jesus' ways and to understand who he is. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once explained that the human mind, on its own, is inadequate to understand Jesus and God. Jesus' disciples only understood fully when he breathed this Spirit into them after his resurrection and the assembled church when it received the Spirit at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is like a midwife – it brings forth, it brings to birth. But this gestation begins within. To live under the influence of the Holy Spirit requires a deep interiority. We need to welcome the Spirit in. We need to listen to the silent Presence of God.

“To welcome God’s Spirit means allowing ourselves to speak alone with a God whom we almost always put far off and outside of ourselves, and to learn to listen to God in the silence of our heart. Stop thinking of God only with the head, and learn to perceive God in the most intimate part of our being. This interior experience of God, something real and concrete, transforms our faith. You wonder at how you could live without discovering this before. Now you know why it’s possible to believe, even in a secularized culture. Now you know an inner joy that’s new and different” (Jose Antonio Pagola). In modern life we are good at ‘doing’, but to live an authentic Christian spirituality we do need to guard against a ‘doing’ that is disconnected from an interiority where we surrender in faith to God.

The Holy Spirit is also imaged as fire and wind. Fire, wind and water are all powerful elements. They bring life and they are also powerful forces of destruction. In the same way the Holy Spirit cleanses and purifies. It brings the fire of love, understanding and forgiveness and where those things abound we are cleansed of such things as hatred, resentment and intolerance.

“The Spirit is there to assist as the church labors to witness to God's truth, justice, peace and love. There to encourage when the going becomes difficult. There to comfort and strengthen when weakness sets in and quitting looks tempting. There to remind the community of its commitment to support and protect life, all life, from the womb to the tomb. There to challenge the community to rise above its smallness. There to draw the attention of the community to the needs of God's poor ones. There to breathe and pray within every one of God's own. There to keep all eyes on the goal of preaching the good news to all, without exception and without stinting. There to light a fire in the belly of those who have grown weary and disillusioned. There to heighten the sensitivities of the well-off and worry-free toward the plight of the lost and the wounded. There to shed light in the darkness. There to be the love that empowers all we are, all we do, all we become” (Patricia Datchuck Sanchez).

So in these early winter evenings you might like to light a candle, and as you sit in its glow, surrender your thoughts and your heart, your very self, to this empowering and enabling Spirit.



Holy Spirit, bestowing life unto life,
moving in All.

You are the root of all creatures,
washing away all impurity,
scouring guilt,
and anointing wounds.
Thus you are luminous and praiseworthy, Life,
awakening, and re-awakening all that is.

Hildegard of Bingen, Medieval German abbess and mystic.

Kerry McCullough
Dean of Mission