

Pentecost, 27 May 2007

Let us pray:

Father, we pray through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, on this great festival of Pentecost which marks the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of your Church, that I may speak your truth in love.

We pray that we all may listen and hear your word to comfort, challenge, renew and enliven us to worship you and to serve each other and the world as witnesses to Christ in every aspect of our lives. AMEN

As you know, Pentecost, with Christmas and Easter, is one of the three great festivals of the Church. We celebrated the birth of Jesus as truly human at Christmas, contemplated the crucifixion that inevitably followed the challenge his ministry of love and justice posed to the secular powers of Rome and the collaborators in the temple hierarchy, and then his resurrection on Easter Sunday and ascension to heaven.

All this was necessary for the sending of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and to us to continue God's mission on earth and the in-breaking of his kingdom. The Holy Spirit enabled the Church to grow beyond the original disciples as the agent of reconciliation for humanity and ultimately for the whole of creation - always selflessly pointing to Jesus as redeemer and the Father as creator.

Pentecost, from the Greek for the 50th day after Easter, is also called 'Whitsunday' perhaps because of the white garments worn by those traditionally baptised on Pentecost Sunday (who missed out on Easter Sunday), or linked to the 'wit' or wisdom with which the apostles were filled by the Holy Spirit. Red vestments and clothing are symbolic of the tongues of fire and of the love of the Holy Spirit. We also think today of our indigenous brothers and sisters and the 40th anniversary of the referendum that enabled them to be counted in the Census. **But today is the Church's birthday and we will have birthday cake after the service as part of the Pentecost celebration of new life.**

Looking at today's readings:

- ❖ Ps 104 emphasises the important truth that the Spirit creates and renews as a key person of the Trinity.
- ❖ In Acts 2, St Luke tells us that if we repent and are baptised we will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ The Gospel reading from John chapter 14 affirms that Jesus asked the Father to send the Holy Spirit who will never leave us, and will teach us and lead us into all truth and give us peace of mind and heart – so, we are reassured, don't be troubled or afraid.
- ❖ This is why we can say 'Peace be with you' or 'Peace is with you' which perhaps better reflects the reality of God's constant presence in our lives – even if we don't always perceive and appreciate it. We are God's adopted sons and daughters.

As some of you know, our elder daughter, Elise, started in year 7 at Girls' Grammar this year. Perhaps because she has been brought to church weekly since she was born, she is currently rebelling a bit against the institutional church. But recently when the family was driving to Mudgee, she described how she and a class mate had seen another new year 7 alone and crying and had gone over to her to talk and include her. The girl had cheered up straight away.

Elise reported that this had made her (Elise) feel loved. To me, this is a very clear example of cooperating (although unconsciously) with the Holy Spirit in having empathy, communicating, building relationship, and then feeling God's love in doing so – simple but profound.

The Holy Spirit has many names and characteristics but I think Bishop John Taylor's the '**Go-between God**' is one of the most helpful. **The Holy Spirit is the great communicator in the Trinity** who searches the depths and mystery of God the Father, and who was constantly with Jesus from his baptism and during his ministry, and enabled his resurrection.

The same Go-between God searches and renews us and seeks to incorporate us in the perfect, unselfish outpouring of love that exists between the Father and the Son. This Holy Spirit of life will ultimately resurrect our earthly

bodies as the primal force of love.

When we say 'the Grace' (2 Cor. 13:24) we know the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of fellowship and communion. The Spirit is also the Advocate, the Counsellor, the Comforter, the Sanctifier and the Sustainer.

Christian life will inevitably involve suffering as a result of freedom, evil, disease, natural disasters, and our own self-sacrifice. **But it will always involve relationship, fellowship, communion, love and holy joy through the Holy Spirit.**

Like the wind, we can't tame the Spirit who is surprising, disruptive, dynamic, transforming and intensifying in our lives. But, as Elise found, if we have empathy and compassion for another person and cooperate with the Spirit in communicating and forging relationship, we will know God's love.

I particularly today wanted to say a few things based on the reading from Ephesians chapter 4.

Last year, Ian emphasised the fruits of the Spirit that develop through Christ-like living. The reading repeats three of these – love, peace and gentleness – and you will remember that the others are joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control (Gal. 5:19-25). **But I want to focus on what are called the spiritual gifts, gifts of the Holy Spirit.**

Ephesians 4 explains that these gifts are given by God's grace to equip Christ's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up – both in our church community and in all our lives in the world. ***If you like, these are 'birthday presents' given for each other.***

What are these gifts of the Spirit or gifts for ministry?

They are known as the *charismata* from the Greek *charis* meaning God's unmerited love to us, and these are unmerited gifts of grace for which we are to be thankful.

Acts 2 emphasises the gift of languages to enable communication of the Gospel good news to all people whatever their language, culture or context. The gift of tongues, emphasised by the contemporary Pentecostal churches, can also include speaking or singing to God in an unknown language (*glossolalia*). This was a gift that St Paul sought to moderate in the Corinthian church because it is so individualistic unless someone with the gift of interpreting tongues can do so to edify the rest of the congregation. This combination can equate to the important spiritual gift of prophecy.

The New Testament includes several non-exhaustive lists of spiritual gifts, especially in Romans chapter 12 and 1 Corinthians chapter 12, as well as Ephesians chapter 4.

The key gifts also include: service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, mercy, wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, spiritual discernment, apostleship, helping, administration, evangelism, pastoral ministry, celibacy, voluntary poverty, martyrdom, missionary service, and hospitality. Intercession, deliverance, musicianship, preaching, humour, art, and craftsmanship may also be included. We each have one or more of these spiritual gifts that differ according to God's grace and are complementary within our congregations and parish as is clear in St Paul's metaphor of the different parts of the body – eye, hand, foot and so forth.

These are not just natural gifts and talents (which also come from God as creator).

These are 'energies of the future' - special kingdom gifts and extraordinary abilities to be used intentionally for the church that have the characteristic that when we use them for God's work the output that results is disproportionate to our own input – an inspirational or super- or future-natural element is present. In Elise's case she just decided to talk to and include the girl who was crying. It was the love and fellowship of the Holy Spirit – working through Elise and her friend that did the work! Many of us have similar experiences: God – in the powerful love of the Holy Spirit – works through – and beyond – our endeavours.

Great composers like Bach, Beethoven and Mozart refer to just writing down music they have been given as inspired by God. More commonly, often we have a great sense of fulfilment and purpose and perhaps 'flow' in using spiritual gifts. They are fundamental to our true identity and a realisation of our deepest hope and longing and vocation. When we use them, we feel especially close to God, we find new reserves of energy and we want to do more.

Speaking personally, I have always been stronger on the thinking, rational left side of the brain than the emotional, creative right-brain side. I find joy and purpose in using gifts of leadership and administration and in developing theological knowledge but also in helping with small things like the projection of songs at the (second) service. David Horton, Greg Mills and David Walters have similar gifts (and probably many others), while Mary Thorn, Jill Grienke and Gaynor Elder's gifts include intercession, Ian's and Gayl's gifts include pastoring, James has a gift of teaching, Ken King has a gift of craftsmanship, and Peter Palij and Lee Furner have gifts of musicianship. **While the spiritual gifts include super-natural ministry gifts, they all require use of our will and mind. God wants us to freely cooperate with the Holy Spirit.**

While we are promised that we each have these spiritual gifts, how do we identify them and use them? Let me sketch six ways to identify the spiritual gifts.

1. We can sometimes see the best qualities of ourselves in others.
2. We can be attentive and sensitive to the Holy Spirit and notice small things that give strong hints and guidance, often when we make ourselves especially vulnerable and open.
3. We can review who we are, what we are, and how we are at the point where we feel a special touch of God in our lives.
4. We can experience the abundance that goes beyond our own efforts in using particular gifts.
5. We can use a questionnaire instrument to indicate likely spiritual gifts.
6. And we can seek the discernment of mature Christians who know us well.

The use of the spiritual gifts is what I am really passionate about because it could make such a difference in our parish if every parishioner was encouraged and helped to identify and use his or her spiritual gifts from helping to hospitality to intercession.

Indeed, unless they are all used we will not be cooperating fully in God's mission for our parish in our worship and in our service to others at home, at work and in the rest of our lives. We are all called to charismatic ministry using whatever gifts we are given. We need two eyes, two hands, two feet, a heart and so forth if we are to be fully church and fully effective.

All gifts are to be used following the example and headship of Jesus – in love and with justice. And the great thing about obediently using our gifts is that we experience the joy and peace and reassurance that we are cooperating with our Lord. I think this is what St Irenaeus meant by ‘the glory of God is man fully alive’. We are fully alive when we use our gifts for ministry and they edify and encourage each other in worship and service – a foretaste of life after death.

So in the words of 1 Peter chapter 4 “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” Speak to Ian or James if you want help in identifying your gifts or using them more fully.

So to briefly recap: **remember that the Holy Spirit will never leave us and we do not need to fear the future.**

- ❖ This **Spirit is the ‘Go-between God’** “the communicator of the Trinity” who knows us intimately, makes Jesus real to us, and encourages us to listen to, and have empathy for, others, and to communicate and build relationships in love.
- ❖ The Spirit of life produces fruit in our lives as we follow Christ and gives us special gifts of ministry to be used for the benefit of the whole body, our church.
- ❖ We celebrate the coming of the Spirit in today’s Pentecost festival of new life in Christ.

Let us pray:

*O wind that sways no branches, fire that does not burn,
unimaginable light that does not blind, fountain of life that
has no end,
infinite river of joy, flawless mirror of God’s power,
kind, laughing agent of God’s mirth, gentle consolation of
God’s mercy,
O Holy Spirit of God, abide with your people, come to us
now.*

*Flame-dancing Spirit, come; sweep us off our feet and
dance through our days.
Surprise us with your rhythms, dare us to try new steps,
explore new patterns and new relationships.
Release us from old routines, to swing in abandoned joy
and fearful adventure.
And in the intervals, rest us, in your still centre.*

*Gift-giving Spirit come, shower on us the gifts of your love;
Give us the vulnerability and will to receive them, guide us
to discern their presence and their purpose;
Lead us to use them for your mission in our church and in
the world, forever worshipping and serving Christ as our
Lord;
Celebrating diversity, but always seeking to maintain the
unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. AMEN*