

The Gift of the Holy Spirit — Come Holy Spirit, Renew Us

Sermon · Not stated (a Pentecost sermon)

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and we will meditate on the theme “The Gift of the Holy Spirit,” with the prayer in our hearts, “Come, Holy Spirit, renew us.”

Unlike Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, this day passes without much fanfare, and there is a good chance that we may not think about it in anticipation as we do with other occasions in the Christian calendar. But remember that it is another sign from God, a remarkable allusion in the unfolding of the Gospel truths, and it does deserve our fullest attention on this very significant occasion of commemorating the events of Pentecost, which took place almost two thousand years ago. To comprehend the significance of this event, we need to understand its place in the Biblical narrative.

The event happened fifty days after the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was during this “quiet” interval of fifty days of anxiety and anticipation that the convictions of His disciples regarding His Resurrection, and its impact on human lives, were formed and became rooted. On Pentecost Sunday it all went public, and history was changed; ever since, the lives of humankind took on a new meaning, and people began to understand God more intimately. As we read in Acts 2:1-13, it was on that day that the Holy Spirit of God came down to indwell amongst the followers of Jesus. This is the day the Church, the Body of Christ, was born. This is the very day on which Jesus became a personal God for each believer.

On that day, the Spirit of God descended on the followers of Jesus dramatically, and they were heard to speak in languages from around the world. This created such a commotion that thousands who were in Jerusalem at the time came out to see what was happening, and in front of the gathering crowd, Peter — the fisherman, Peter the unread — spoke the first Gospel sermon of repentance, redemption, and salvation, and “the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41, King James Version). The number of followers of Jesus Christ has been growing continually ever since that Pentecost Sunday, and it stands today at some 2.6 billion people, or getting on for a third of the world’s population.

The apostle Thomas is traditionally said to have evangelised Kerala, and the Madras region further along the coast, in the middle of the first century, traditionally dated to around AD 52. According to the 1961 census, Christians made up 21.2% of Kerala’s population; by the 2011 census, the most recent India has held, that figure had fallen to 18.38%. Nationally, however, the picture is different: the Christian share of India’s population has in fact grown modestly over the same period, from around 1.9% in 1971 to 2.3% in 2011, so it is Kerala’s own decline, and not any nationwide trend, that should concern us. What are we doing about it?

As an aside, Pentecost was itself a regular Old Testament festival. In the time of Moses, several annual festivals were prescribed and celebrated throughout the year. The festival of Passover was the first to be celebrated in the Jewish year. Jesus was crucified at that very festival. Jesus, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed on the same day that all Jews were sacrificing their lambs in memory of their first Passover, their exodus from captivity as slaves in Egypt. Given that there are 365 days in a year, it is striking that Jesus died on that very day. It is as if Moses, some fifteen hundred years before the event, established the festival of Passover as a pointer to the eventual crucifixion of Jesus.

It does not end there. Exactly fifty days after Passover, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Pentecost, or the Festival of Weeks, a harvest festival celebrated seven weeks and one day after the first Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Jewish community had been doing so annually for some fifteen hundred years by the time the events of Acts 2 took place. The reason there were people of all languages in Jerusalem that day to hear Peter’s message was precisely because they were there to celebrate the Old Testament Pentecost.

The significance of the indwelling Holy Spirit in post-Pentecostal generations such as ours, as opposed to the visiting Spirit of Old Testament times, is pronounced loud and clear in Ezekiel 36:26-27. In these verses, we hear God’s proclamation: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezekiel 36:26-27, King James Version). The ministry of transformation by the Holy Spirit is an ongoing process. Through this power, God the Son, Jesus Christ, transforms everything. This transformation happens in believers through the breaking of the heart and the infilling of the Spirit.

Let us ask ourselves a question: who or what is shaping our lives — our physical, emotional, intellectual, and also our spiritual selves? Our physical being is often shaped by the things we eat or do not eat, and also by the physical exercise we do or do not do; our emotional being is often shaped by our parents, teachers, friends, mentors, church, and others who influence us, or by the absence of such influence; our intellectual being is shaped largely through the education we receive, the mistakes we make and the lessons we learn from them, our workplace exposure, the general environment of our upbringing, and also through media such as films, television, music, sport, and the news.

The most critical question we need to answer is who or what is shaping our spiritual being. In this context, I would urge you to read Jeremiah 18:1-17, in which we find that God sent Jeremiah on a field trip of study to the potter's house. The prophet must have observed how carefully the potter prepares the clay from dry earth, moistening it with the right quantity of water — we need the Holy Spirit to irrigate our hardened hearts — and working it to the correct consistency — creating within us a receptive heart and mind — before the clay is placed on the wheel. He must also have observed how the potter shapes the clay into vessels with his own two hands, while, all this time, the design of the vessel exists only in the potter's mind (for us, God's Will for us). During these highly skilled operations, the pottery may not turn out perfect, or may become marred through imperfections in the clay. But the potter is not discouraged, nor does he ever throw the clay away as waste, never to be looked upon again. So long as the clay remains moist and soft, yielding to his hands — receptiveness — he will re-use it to reshape and make another vessel. He is constantly at it, and works tirelessly to shape the vessel the way he wants it shaped. Then God asks: "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel" (Jeremiah 18:6, King James Version). The lesson for us is that, so long as we remain soft like the moist clay, our Potter, God the Son, Jesus Christ, who is full of mercy, can FORM, REFORM, and TRANSFORM us through God the Holy Spirit. He is unlikely to give up on us, even those of us with hardened hearts, due to sins that are yet to be neutralised and annihilated.

In this light, we should continue to ask ourselves: who shapes our spiritual being? Is it Jesus, our Potter, or some motivational practitioner? Is it the Holy Spirit, or some other spiritual influence? Is it the Scriptures, or self-help philosophy? Philosophies propounded by other faiths, mixed with the value system and rule of life set out in the Gospel of Christ, can be a deadly cocktail, which may not merely confuse us but lead us away from the Kingdom of God. I hear and read a great many of these motivational and self-help philosophies being circulated by Christians. We must remember that, quite often, we get carried away by the nuances, compulsions, and distractions of our environment, and by the lifestyles of the modern world. In the process, we tend not to leave enough space for God the Holy Spirit to work on us, and within us.

In Genesis 1:2, in the context of creation, we read: "...and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2, King James Version). The Spirit creates, and recreates — renews. Thus we pray to God, who is Spirit: "Come, Holy Spirit, renew us"; "Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?" (Psalm 85:6, King James Version). David pleaded with God in Psalm 51:10-12: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit" (Psalm 51:10-12, King James Version). David implored God knowing full well that the Spirit of God might be taken away from him, being God's Will then. The two lessons for us from these verses are: first, that we must have a clean and sin-free heart for the Holy Spirit to reside in; and second, that our lives would become directionless, and we might be headed to Hell, unless God the Holy Spirit cleanses and guides us.

How fortunate we are: we have only to be receptive to have the Holy Spirit indwelling within us forever, guiding and convicting us. It is the fulfilment of the promise Jesus made: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" (John 14:16-17, King James Version). What a reassurance for us.

The following echoes words spoken by Ignatius Hazim, Bishop of Latakia and later Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch, in his address to the World Council of Churches' Fourth Assembly at Uppsala in 1968: without the Holy Spirit, God is far away; Christ stays in the past; the Gospel is simply an organisation; the authority of God is a matter of propaganda; the Liturgy is no more than an evolution. But in the Holy Spirit, the cosmos is resurrected and grows with the birth pangs of the Kingdom of Jesus; the Risen Christ remains with humanity forever; the Gospel becomes the power of life; the Church shows forth the life of the Trinity; authority becomes a liberating science; the Liturgy becomes both renewal and anticipation; and human action is sanctified by Jesus.

Therefore, on Pentecost, we gather like the disciples behind closed doors. We come with hopes and fears, with doubts and certainties, with pain and joy, looking to be transformed, to be resurrected, to be made new. We offer a simple prayer, a prayer that the followers of Jesus have whispered and sung: Come, Holy Spirit, renew us. It is a plea, a prayer to be once more filled with the breath of God that called creation into being.

Our simple prayer, “Come, Holy Spirit,” is the first step towards saying yes to Christ’s desire to enter our faith life and indwell in us as God the Holy Spirit. That same longing to say yes to God is captured beautifully by Edwina Gateley in her poem “Called to Say Yes,” from her book *There Was No Path So I Trod One* (1996; new edition 2013) — well worth seeking out and reading in full. In it, she calls us to say yes to a God who reaches out to a trembling world and “still holds fast to the vision of the Kingdom,” inviting us to share in what she calls His “crazy dream of love.”

Let us pray: Jesus, God of Life, Who breathes new life into the whole creation and sends down the Spirit as tongues of fire, inspire and kindle Your faithful ones, breathing upon us the Spirit Divine, so that the whole creation may be reconciled in the love of Christ through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forevermore.