

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Pentecost Sunday

(b-pentecost)

20 May 2018

Readings: Acts 2: 1-21; Psalm 104: 26-36;
Romans 8: 22-27; John 15: 26-27, 16: 4b-15.

“Creating, Renewing, Empowering, Transforming Spirit”

I may not have the style of Bishop Curry at yesterday's wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, but I am no less passionate about the importance of love and its origins in God. Indeed, of it as an expression of the nature of God that is within us.

At Pentecost we remind ourselves of how that love is made manifest in the world, which is through the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit. So, let us go then, you and I, on a journey of discovery of God's presence and power.

All Pervading Spirit

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God moved over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2)

God's Spirit, or breath, is to be found in the Bible from the opening verses of Genesis to the Revelation of St John. The Spirit of God features as a force that creates, gives life, renews and transforms humanity so that we may become the people that God wants us to be.

In Exodus it is described as that which brings 'ability, intelligence, knowledge, and artistic skills' (Exodus 31: 1-5). In the Psalms it is described as bringing 'restoration and sustenance' (Psalm 51: 10-12). And in Isaiah it is that which brings about 'wisdom, understanding, might, and fear of the Lord' (Isaiah 11: 1-3).

From the New Testament we come to understand that the Spirit brings about transformation, especially through those things that draw us closer to God, such as Baptism and Eucharist. In all these things, therefore, the Spirit of God is present drawing us into knowledge of God and an experience of divine love.

Spiritual Anthropology

I therefore turn to exploring something of spiritual anthropology – that is, what it is to be a ‘spiritual person’. Despite the claims of some that religion is dead, we are nevertheless witnessing a significant growth in what might be loosely called ‘spirituality’. Indeed, many people these days would want to see themselves as being ‘spiritual people’ rather than ‘religious people’. It is in this way that people now talk about that which holds their lives together and gives meaning, direction and purpose.

The word ‘spirit’ comes from the Latin word ‘spiritus’, which means ‘to breathe’ and correlates with the Greek word ‘pneuma’ used in the New Testament. Like breath, the presence of spirit is a sign of life; and so, spirit came to be understood as the life force, or soul, of a person.

The Hebrew word for spirit is ‘ruach’, which is a feminine word, and is the reason that the Spirit is often referred to as ‘she’. The feminine and creative aspects of the Spirit are also gathered by St Paul in the readings from Romans 8, where he wrote:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

(Romans 8:22-23)

On the other hand, the Old Testament describes the Spirit as being God’s activity in the world that brings order out of chaos. Putting these things together, we have come to understand that the Spirit not only nurtures and renews the creation, but also brings order. To be sure, it is the Holy Spirit that brings renewal and new life into our own lives day by day.

A wise person was asked, “What is spirituality?” and she responded: “Spirituality is that which brings about inner transformation”. That was not enough for the enquirer, so they asked, “But if I go to church, obey the Ten Commandments, and believe the ‘right things’, is that not spirituality?”

“It is not spirituality” came the reply, “if it does not perform its function for you. A blanket is no longer a blanket if it is not used to keep you warm. Instead, it is merely a piece of cloth. People change and needs change. So, what was spirituality in the past may not be so any more, and what is spirituality for one person is merely an imposition for another.”

Spirituality is therefore a dynamic thing that is involved in the process of both individual and social transformation rather than an imposed set of ideas, disciplines or rules, such as what the Pharisees pursued.

It is helpful for us to understand ourselves as people of the Holy Spirit. At Baptism, we pray that the Holy Spirit may make us ‘one with Christ in his death and resurrection’. Likewise, at Confirmation we pray that a person may be ‘strengthened with the Holy Spirit’. The presence of the Holy Spirit then, is the creative dynamic in our lives that helps us to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Our spiritual anthropology therefore is expressed through our understanding of the nature of God and runs something like this:

- God the Father is the creator, who calls things into being and who watches over the world while seeking to bring its people into relationship with himself.
- God the Son is the person who, at a moment in time, lived a life filled with God’s Spirit and sought to bring us back to God. Having come into the world and lived a life as one who is filled with the Spirit, Jesus died and rose from the dead so that we might know God’s promise of transformation and new life.
- God the Holy Spirit is the transforming presence of God in the world today, who leads us to God, and who empowers us for the spiritual journey of transformation and new life.

Understanding the Activity of the Spirit

Christian spirituality is not just about feeling good about ourselves, but rather is a recognition of where we have come from and where we are going and how we are to live today in the light of that process.

As Christians, God calls us into a relationship with himself so that we might come to know how to live and be empowered to change. We are therefore called to be loving people, who have been saved by Christ from lives of emptiness and meaninglessness.

However, there is more. The presence of the Holy Spirit is not just some individualistic thing to help us feel good about ourselves. This is not a theology of the ‘warm inner glow’. Today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us that the Spirit was sent to the people of God – which is the Church.

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost reversed the divisions and cultural fragmentation described in Genesis 11 when, at the Tower of Babel, humanity was divided and scattered. The Babel story is about the human desire for power and status. By building a tower up into the heavens, humanity sought to put itself on an equal footing with God. However, God confused their languages so that they could no longer understand each other. At Pentecost this was reversed, those who could not understand each other heard the gospel in their own tongue - an act of God’s grace.

The Holy Spirit brought understanding and order upon the new Christian community. Peter responded to the situation by reminding the people that this was part of God’s plan, as prophesied by Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”
(Acts 2:17-18)

The Holy Spirit therefore brings strength, focus, order and unity into the church. This is what St Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians that there are many members but one church.

“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. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”
(1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

The Holy Spirit is therefore not the possession of an individual, or even the church, but rather a blessing for all. The challenge for us is to open ourselves to God’s Spirit so that we can be transformed as a community and be empowered for the work of demonstrating the gospel through faith, hope and love.

Because the world needs salvation (which is the ability to live in love, freedom, justice and peace), we therefore need to learn to live in the way that God intended. Moreover, it is when we change that the world changes and then others may see the power of God’s Spirit and the grace that it brings.