

Thought for the Week 31st May 2020

"A young man was apprenticed to a master artist who produced the most beautiful stained-glass windows. The apprentice could not approach the master's genius so he borrowed his master's tools, thinking that was the answer. After several weeks, the young man said to his teacher, 'I'm not doing any better with your tools than I did with mine.' His teacher replied, 'It's not the tools of the master craftsman you need; it's the spirit of the master that you need.'"

Sunday 31st May 2020 is Pentecost Sunday - fifty days after Easter - marking what some have called, "The Birthday of the Church." Let's read about it from Luke's account in Acts chapter 2

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ... ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.' ¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: 'Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say....

³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. ³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ... ³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' ³⁸ Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call.' ⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

When you look at your own life, and the life of your church family do you see the work of the Spirit like it was on that day of Pentecost? Do you see yourself and others rooted in God's truth; convicted of sin and pride, and living in humble submission to God? Do you see yourself and others as healthy, fruitful Christians - overflowing with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control? Do you see the gifts of the Spirit at work in your life, and in the church at large? Do you see the power of God displayed, reaching out to others, transforming hearts and healing bodies? If I were to answer honestly, I'd have to say: 'well, a bit, maybe I see a bit...but not much.'

In reality, there is often a huge gap between who we are... and who we know we're called to be. That gap is the Holy Spirit. So, maybe what we need is a fresh infilling of God's Spirit. We need to stop relying on ourselves, stop trying to live the Christian life in our own strength - and

instead surrender to the God who longs to dwell in and through us - in order that He might change the world. Like my little story at the start - it's usually not the right tools that we need, it's the right Spirit - the Spirit of our Master Craftsman, Jesus Christ.

As we read Acts 2, we can learn some things about the Holy Spirit, things that perhaps we need to rediscover:

First, the Spirit is about God's timing (Acts 1:4-5; 2:1) In Acts 1, Jesus told his disciples to "... wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about."

I'm naturally impatient, and I suspect if I were one of Jesus' first disciples, I might not have wanted to have waited for this mysterious Spirit to come... I'd be thinking, 'Come on, we've got work to do. Let's start making a difference now... this Spirit can come when he's ready.' There's always a risk that this attitude can prevail in our churches. We can jump at the opportunity to do **good** works, rather than wait for the opportunity to do **God's** works. We forget that God sees the bigger picture. We sometimes say, "Let's just go for it. Let's just try this or that..." And, of course now that Covid-19 has struck, we're not able to do very much and perhaps not for quite a period of time. But God knew all about this pandemic and the lockdown, and no doubt, despite what we see as a terrible inconvenience, it's for our good. Maybe God is giving us time out from all the frantic activity that often makes up church life in order to prepare us for what he has planned in the future. If the disciples and Jesus' other followers had rushed out the day after he ascended, they would not have had the power of the Holy Spirit with them and their mission would almost certainly have flopped. But because they waited and were led by the Spirit, the church was born in a mighty way (see verse 41).

Secondly, the Spirit is about God's filling (2:3-4) As I write I have a glass in front of me. It's purpose is to be filled with water (or maybe even something else!) so that my thirst can be quenched. Now this glass does not fill itself automatically - the filling has to be done by someone. In Ephesians 3, Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith and that would "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." That's filled to overflowing, and more, perhaps. And the Greek word Paul uses here means, "continually, again and again, be filled up." Surely that is what we all need. Just like the fuel tank of your car - it needs to be filled up again and again if you are going to go anywhere. Could it be that, when we feel that we aren't getting very far in our walk with Christ, it's because we haven't been open to God filling us up again and again with the promised power of His Holy Spirit? Like my glass, we can't fill ourselves, we can't make it happen. We can't just work ourselves up into a frenzy like the prophets of Baal did in the story of Elijah to try get what they wanted. We can't muster up a spiritual fervour or enthusiasm and pass it off as the Spirit. God's filling comes from seeking God and asking Him for more of His Spirit. It comes from submitting to God and letting Him take the controls of our life.

Thirdly, the Spirit is about God's gifts (2:4)

It was the Spirit who enabled the gathered believers to speak in other tongues on the Day of Pentecost. It wasn't their own cleverness or learning. It was a divine gift. There's so much that we need... and, I believe, so much that God wants to give us - if only we would humble ourselves and ask.

Perhaps you've heard the song 'The Blessing' that has been on YouTube during this lockdown. Singers from churches across the UK joined together from their living rooms to sing this blessing over our nation, based on the blessing that God gives Moses and Aaron in Numbers 6: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace." What struck me as I listened to that song is that this is God's heart for us his people. God longs to bless you and me and His church: to keep us in safety, to show us His favour, to shine His light and glory and grace upon us, to give us real peace.

But what stops us from receiving these gifts? Young children are great at receiving gifts, but in my experience we adults often struggle! If someone gives us a gift, we feel embarrassed and that we have to reciprocate. Sometimes we're held back from accepting offers of help by our pride and self-reliance. We never want to admit that we need help. But the Spirit moves amongst the humble, amongst those who recognise their needs and say, "Come, Holy Spirit".

Fourthly, **the Spirit is about God's mission** (2:11, 21)

The Spirit was not given just to make the first disciples, or us, feel better or to give us a spiritual boost before we get back to normal life. The Spirit is given to enable us to fulfil Jesus' mission so that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (v 21) The Spirit is given to transform us for God's service - because he knows that we can't do it on our own.

I finish with a little true story which, I think, illustrates this well.

Wishing to encourage her young son's progress on the piano, a mother took her boy to a concert given by the world-famous pianist Jan Paderewski during the height of his career early last century. Before the concert started, the mother spotted a friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy got up from his seat and eventually found his way through a door marked, "NO ADMITTANCE." When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned quickly to her seat and discovered that the child was missing. Suddenly, the curtains opened and the spotlights focused on the Steinway concert grand piano on the stage. In horror, the mother saw that her little boy was sitting at the keyboard and innocently had begun picking out, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

At that moment, Paderewski made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear. Then leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child and he added a running obligato. Together, the old master and the young novice pianist transformed a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience. A newspaper article the next day said that, "the audience was mesmerized."

The Holy Spirit working with our spirit will transform the world and mesmerize it. Let's ask him to do it.

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