
The Work of the Spirit

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 19 May 2024 Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21 • Romans 8:22-27 • John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today is Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. We are all familiar with the dramatic scene of the tongues of fire resting on the heads of all the believers who had gathered that day. It was an amazing spectacle! And then the believers all began speaking in other languages, languages they didn't know themselves, but which were heard and understood by the many people of different nationalities there.

(This, by the way, is not what we call "speaking in tongues." The sounds made by those who speak in tongues are unintelligible to anyone else, whereas in this case, the believers were speaking actual known languages.)

All the different nationalities who were present benefitted from being able to understand God's word in their own language. It was, in a way, a preview of God's ultimate plan, that the Gospel would spread around the world. I wonder

how many of those people took the message back to their own countries, when they left Jerusalem!

Beyond this astonishing spectacle, however, we need to look at what the coming of the Holy Spirit really meant. We go to Jesus' own words, from our Gospel reading:

And when he comes, he will prove to the people of the world that they are wrong about sin and about what is right and about God's judgment. ⁹ They are wrong about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ they are wrong about what is right, because I am going to the Father and you will not see me any more; ¹¹ and they are wrong about judgment, because the ruler of this world has already been judged. (John 16:8-11)

What does this mean? There is a lot here to unpack.

First, Jesus says that the Spirit will prove to the people that they are wrong about sin. Sin is not just wrongdoing, a breaking of the law. It is not accepting Jesus, not accepting the truth about God and the world God made, which Jesus taught us. If I hurt someone, or steal from someone, or cause any harm, I may say to myself: I should not have hurt that person. It was wrong to cause them pain or trouble. But if that's all I say to myself, I am missing the big point, which is that I have sinned against God. Jesus taught us the kingdom of God will come when all put their faith in him. If I do not realise that sin is an act against God, then I do not have faith in Jesus; I am not listening to his teaching. And if I do not have faith in Jesus, I am rejecting the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sent to continue the guidance which he began.

John Marsh writes:

Sin is a clouding of the power of spiritual insight which has results in a rejection of Jesus. ... The sin of the world is as it were concentrated in and focused on the rejection of Jesus, culminating in his crucifixion.¹

To sin is to reject Jesus; to reject Jesus is to reject the truth. God made us to be creatures who live in connection with the truth. Satan is often called "the Deceiver," because he acts to separate us from the truth, which is Jesus Christ.

Second, the Spirit will prove to the people that they are wrong about what is right, or righteousness. The reason Jesus gives is curious: "because I am going to the Father and you will see me no more." If we think of righteousness as the way we get ourselves right with God, then we see that Jesus is that way.

Through his death and resurrection he opened the path for us to become right with God, to become the people that God created us to be, pure and without sin,

¹ Marsh, John. *Saint John* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), p536.

living in harmony with all of God's world. Jesus' mission culminated in his rising up to heaven to be with God, and we see him no more in that physical way that the disciples saw him. So the Spirit, as the one who continues the mission of Jesus, shows the world that true righteousness comes only through Jesus — open to us now because Jesus indeed finished his mission.

Finally, the Spirit proves to the people that they are wrong about judgment, “because the ruler of this world has already been judged.” John was writing about Satan as the ruler of the world. God saw the sinful state of the world, and we see it today: all the people who turn away from God and believe that they can live completely independent lives, respecting only their own wants and desires. Certainly we see a lot of this around us in the world today. But Jesus, in defeating death and rising again, has shown that it is he who has the ultimate power. Satan — even death — has no power over him. And he will judge us on where we place our faith: on the people and things of the world, or on him.

When we think of the Holy Spirit, many of us picture the flames on the heads, or the dove that comes down upon Jesus when John baptised him in the Jordan. We don't always give the Spirit its place as an equal one of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, and it's not surprising. There is always a bit of mystery about the Spirit. Jesus was once a man, and we can picture a man. Many of us have a mental image of God as well, whether it's the old image of an old man with a long flowing beard, or something more contemporary. But the Spirit eludes us rather; and yet it is inside all of us, and constantly guides us. It is the greatest gift, right up there with life itself, that God and Jesus have given us. And so on this day of Pentecost, we remember, and try to understand — but above all, give thanks.

I finish with a passage from William Barclay:

When we are convicted of our own sin, when we are convinced of Christ's righteousness, when we are convinced of judgment to come, what gives us the certainty that in the cross of Christ is our salvation and that with Christ we are forgiven, and saved from judgment? This, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who convinces us and makes us sure that in this crucified figure we can find our Saviour and our Lord. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and convinces us of our Saviour.²

Amen.

² Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John Vol. 2* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1975), p226.