

**Pentecost (Acts 2.1-24, 33, 36)**

Sarah Bachelard

Pentecost – which means ‘50 days’ in Greek – was originally a Jewish festival – and continues to be so. It commemorates the day God gave the Law to Israel on Mount Sinai. Just as in our calendar Pentecost is directly linked to the date of Easter, so in the Jewish calendar it is directly linked to the date of the Passover. At Passover, the people of Israel were set free by God from their slavery in Egypt; fifty days later, they were given the Torah which formed them as a people chosen to serve God, capable of witnessing to God among the nations. In Hebrew this festival is called Shavuot which means ‘weeks’. This is because, as well as celebrating the gift of the Torah, the Festival of Weeks marked the season of the grain harvest in Israel, which began with the barley harvest during Passover and ended seven weeks later with the harvesting of the wheat at Shavuot. Says the Book of Exodus: ‘You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year’ (Ex.34.22).

These are a rich set of associations for exploring the meaning of the first Pentecost of the Christian tradition, as it is presented by Luke. The disciples are gathered on the day of the Jewish festival, celebrating God’s gift of the Law and the culmination of the grain harvest – when ‘suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting’. It seems that the overwhelming inrush of the Holy Spirit is to be understood, at least in part, in terms of fruition, harvest, *and* of God’s giving a new kind of Torah, a new

formation of God's people after their release from slavery through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Last week I said that the season of Easter shows us the transition undergone by the disciples from their knowing Jesus in a human way, as an *object* of their perception and separate from them, to knowing him through their participation in his life and the transformation of their subjectivity. We saw with the Ascension, the departure of the risen Jesus from their midst, that part of this transition necessarily involves a kind of losing God and ourselves, entering into the experience of unknowing where we let go our ordinary human ways of trying to know, grasp, understand, contain God and learn to wait upon God's self-gift.

On the day of Pentecost, this gift is given – the Holy Spirit, the very energy and vitality of God, fills the disciples and transforms them from within. From now on it is in, through and with the Spirit that they are in relationship with God, themselves and other people. It is because of God's self-gift that they are able to love with God's own love and to communicate God in the world. The point of Pentecost is not that the disciples have a particular and overwhelming spiritual experience – the point is that they *are* no longer simply themselves, separate from God – who they are is internally constituted by God's Spirit. As Paul puts it, they are beginning to share the mind of Christ.

It is hard to speak of this and not feel as though we are floating six inches above the ground – I can 'get it' or at least think I 'get it' in the abstract, but what really are we talking about here? How does this affect, concretely, how I am in the world and in my relationships, how I see and understand everything?

Let me say two things that seem to me significant in all this. The first is, if the gift of the Spirit is given to draw us onto the inside of God's life, to see and love as God sees, then it is essentially misguided to make the Spirit itself an *object* of our experience – or

to understand particular experiences as themselves the necessary and sufficient signs of the Spirit's indwelling. The Carmelite teacher of prayer, Ruth Burrows (who herself draws on St John of the Cross) insists that particular phenomena may reflect the psychological or physiological symptoms of contact with God's Spirit (a form of 'aftershocks') but they are not in themselves the Spirit – the Spirit literally cannot be contained, but overflows us – at times in experiences of ecstasy or rapture, yes, but at times in such a way that consciousness cannot even register the Spirit's presence – it is *beyond* our senses. And this resonates with John Main's insistence that we are not to seek after any particular spiritual experience in the practice of contemplative prayer. The Spirit is the river of love that flows between Father and Son and that draws us too into the divine subjectivity, the dynamic of infinitely giving relationship. She cannot be seen directly and we receive her only to the extent that, in fact, we take our attention off ourselves and our experience. We see from, in and through the Spirit – we are not looking at her, possessing her, making her a badge of our spiritual progress. The eye that sees does not see itself.

So if we can't look at, and maybe can't even directly 'feel' the presence of the Spirit, how *is* the gift of the Spirit to be discerned? How are we to realise the transformation being wrought in us? Here, I think, it is helpful to attend what Luke and also John (in his very different portrayal of the gift of the Holy Spirit) say about the personhood of the Spirit. Luke, it has been said, invented the church year – and it is his chronological spacing of events which organises our festivals. John, however, portrays the Spirit being given to the disciples on the very first evening of the resurrection. The disciples are huddling behind locked doors 'for fear of the Jews'. Jesus came and stood among them, writes John. He said "Peace be with you". After he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send

you". When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20. 19-22).

Despite the pyrotechnics and an admittedly obscure sermon from Peter, Luke strikingly insists on the same dynamic in his account of the gift of the Spirit: 'this man, Jesus of Nazareth, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law', he has Peter say. 'But God raised him up, having freed him from death ... Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear ... Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified'.

In other words, for neither Luke nor John is the Holy Spirit simply an overwhelming numinous force or impersonal divine energy, but is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus – the Spirit he has received from the Father, and which he in turn gives, breathes, pours out, upon his disciples.

It seems to me that a danger in our celebration of Ascension and Pentecost is that they can so easily attract triumphalist overtones – Christ is *exalted* to God's right hand on high, the Spirit is *poured out* from above and takes the disciples somehow out of ourselves, with miraculous gifts of tongues and power. It is easy to begin to see the Spirit as the powerful bit of God that rescues Jesus and raises him, and which in turn rescues and raises us. And although the suffering and death of Jesus is somehow a necessary step in the process, that's now left behind. For those who are filled with the power of the Spirit, there is no real vulnerability anymore. And maybe this is the source of the difficulty some Pentecostal traditions have in acknowledging and being with weakness, illness, failure, the source of their equation of godliness with prosperity and success. The Spirit is the power of God – but, in this kind of triumphalist reading, power is understood still entirely in this worldly terms, as success, dominion, influence.

But the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus is not that kind of power. She is, rather, the power who sustains Jesus in and through his human journey (not bypassing it), the energy of his indefeasible longing to bring home the lost sheep and heal the broken-hearted. She is the power who calls him out into the desert so that, fully reconciled to himself, he might become the source of reconciliation for all – free to descend in radical trust into the darkest places, even death, receiving his life as gift.

Filled with *this* Spirit, the disciples begin to share this life. They realise their profound communion with those of every nation under heaven – the barriers between them, symbolised so powerfully by their different languages, suddenly dissolve. They are empowered to live out their human vocations in radically more courageous ways – boldly and fully alive, less afraid of death and the domination of the ‘world’s’ systems of power and meaning. They become lovers of truth – freed from the illusions of collective consciousness, and profoundly responsive to the real. These are not lives which escape vulnerability and suffering, but lives handed over (like Jesus’) to transform creation from within. It is true that at this first Pentecost, they seem also to have experienced extraordinary phenomena. But these are not the essence. What is of the essence is our being empowered, whether dramatically or gradually, to make our own journeys through fear and illusion towards wholeness and truth, so as to communicate the divine life and love in our world. As we open ourselves through sacrament and silence to receive anew this promised life in ours – so let us pray, Come, Holy Spirit, come.