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Spirit Poured: Pentecost (Acts 2:1-18)

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Church seems an ambivalent place to be these days. In myself, I'm often conscious of tension about my ecclesial belonging. On the one hand, I remember the moment in my mid-thirties when I was profoundly struck by the weirdness of the fact that the church exists at all. Here it is – a public institution in the midst of our fear-driven, rivalrous, tribalized world that exists to say, when all is said and done, 'love is what it's all about'. How strange is that?! Whatever gave us that idea? How bizarre that alongside parliaments, businesses and universities, sporting clubs and debating societies, there's this – a communal, embodied witness to love as the ultimate reality! The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, '*that* the world is and not *how* it is, is the mystical' and I'm a bit inclined to say the same for the church. *That* it is, not *how* it is, is the mystical. And yet, how difficult the church can be to love! How manifold its failures to be itself and serve its vocation.

And this, I think, is why remembering the source of the church's life is such an important thing to do. At the Feast of Pentecost we remember that any Christian community is *constituted* as such only by the gift of God's Spirit and *continues* as such only as it remains receptive and obedient to this gift. Indeed, unless enlivened by this Spirit and authentically responsive to it, the church becomes just another human collective, liable to the same preoccupations with status, power and survival as any other institution – only often a good deal more hypocritical about it.

But what – or better, *who* is this Spirit? How do we discern her presence or absence, her leading and call – not just in general, but right here – at Benedictus – upon and among us?

Spirit hovers, rests, descends. Like the wind, Jesus says, the spirit 'blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes' (John 3:8). *We're* not in control; but that doesn't mean the Spirit is amorphous, without character or characteristic effect. For one thing, in Scripture, talk of the Spirit is always tied to embodiment, matter. Theologian Eugene Rogers highlights the material loci for the Spirit's activity in our tradition: the Holy Spirit is called down on the person at baptism, and on bread and wine in the Eucharist; she's said to brood over the water at creation, enter Mary's womb at the annunciation and fall on the disciples gathered at Pentecost.¹

There's a persistent dualism in Western thought between spirit and body, exemplified for me by a conversation I had on the Camino with a fellow pilgrim. She had sore feet and complained sorrowfully that she'd thought it would be a 'more spiritual experience'. But in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, there is no experience of the Spirit that is not embodied. The Spirit rests on matter, transfiguring, transforming, enlivening bodies. And not just human bodies, but the body of the world itself. Scholar Aaron Riches points out that the context for the prophet Joel's proclamation of the Spirit poured out on all flesh speaks of God's coming of peace for the whole material creation:

the soil is told to be glad and rejoice (2:21); the animals of the field are told not to fear (2:22), the people are told that God has 'given the early rain for your vindication' (2:23), that the threshing floor will be full of grain (2:24), and 'You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied' (2:26). It is against this physicality that God says, 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy' (Joel 2:28).²

But *how* more precisely is this Spirit embodied? How is it characteristically effective? In stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, the effect of the Spirit on human persons seems most often to have been experienced as the power of prophetic speech and leadership (eg. Numbers 11). This resonance is clearly picked up by Peter's sermon

¹ Eugene F. Rogers Jr, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), pp.1-2.

² Cited in Rogers, *After the Spirit*, p.2.

at the day of Pentecost. But the speech erupting from the disciples on this occasion is not simply expressing prophetic vision. It is enabling (through the gift of tongues) the continuation of Jesus' ministry of reconciliation. It's bringing to birth a community without limit, where everyone may belong to God and to one another. And in other ways, too, the Spirit acts in New Testament communities to draw human lives into the dynamic of Jesus' relation to the Father, enabling us to share in what he was doing. This work, this gifting of the Spirit shows up differently in different lives. In some, says St Paul, the gift of the Spirit is manifest as wisdom, in others faith; in some, as the power of healing, in others generosity or discernment (1 Cor. 12). On the day of Pentecost a Spirit-filled community is constituted through which the very life and love and freedom of God is embodied on earth as the *body* of Christ.

Which brings us to us. We are the body of Christ. Christ's Spirit is with us. It's a pretty extraordinary claim, when you think about it. Take a moment to be present to this, to one another as fellow members of this Christ-ic body, fellow receivers of the Spirit.

We are the body of Christ. The 'we' in this statement means that *together* we're called to manifest God's life on earth, not just singly or separately. By God's grace, we belong to one another and though at times we might frustrate or disappoint or rub against one another, nevertheless *we* are to be a Christ-like community, where all know themselves deeply welcome, liberated to offer the gift we are and might be.

We are the *body* of Christ. The Spirit rests on bodies, transforms embodied lives. The 'body' in this statement is why supper matters and getting to know one another through Benediction, at community days and our other groups. It's why I'm delighted to hear more and more stories of people connecting with one another outside our service, sharing meals, befriending and caring for one another, paying attention to each other's difficulties and joys. For St Paul, a sign of the Spirit in communities had to do with the breaking down of accepted social barriers, between Jew and Gentile, slave and free.

Similarly, in our privatized, self-protective society, a sign of the Spirit is the willingness to risk authentic relationships with those who are outside our habitual or natural circles of family, friends and colleagues. Rowan Williams speaks of ‘breathing the air of Christ, Christ becoming the atmosphere in which we live’ and says that this comes from ‘the constant maintenance of relation and growth as we give into each others’ lives and receive from each other, so that we advance in trust and confidence with one another and God’.³

And we are the body of *Christ*. Christ’s body, as well you know, is not self-enclosed – a nice Christian club – but an ever-expanding sharing of love. Williams, again, speaks of the ‘porous boundaries of life in Christ’⁴ – and this invites us to be open ever and again to the world around us, to other people and to the future, living responsively as listeners, adventurers in the Spirit. Humility is part of this – being content to be where we are, not puffing ourselves up or being anxious about our life. But so is daring – daring to trust that the Spirit has called us together and that there is a part for us to play in what God is doing in our times. I do believe this – I see signs of the Spirit in what is already happening among us – as we support one another in our vocations, as wonderings emerge from our justice day, as we share conversations about listening and land and deepened reconciliation with the whole, and as we are drawn into the broader movement of contemplative Christianity.

Spirit hovers, rests, descends – when things coalesce and how – well, she blows where she wills and you never quite know the day or the hour. But Pentecost is not just a past event. It is an ever-renewed and ever-renewing outpouring of the Spirit on the bodies of those open to being drawn more deeply into God and to share God’s life in the world. Let us be alert together for the brush of her wings.

³ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 105.

⁴ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.107.