

**I Am Going Away, and I Am Coming to You (John 14: 15-29)**

The Feast of Pentecost © Sarah Bachelard

There's a strikingly different energy in the way John's gospel speaks of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the way most of us think of the Day of Pentecost has been shaped by Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles – the whole extended company of disciples gathered in one place, the sudden sound of a violent or rushing wind, divided tongues as of fire appearing and resting on each of them, and all miraculously speaking in other languages 'as the Spirit gave them ability' (Acts 2: 1-4). There's sound, movement, light, action – theologian James Alison says that Luke sometimes writes like a Hollywood script writer, and here we have it all – an inrush of unmistakably divine power, the dawning of a radically new age.

In John, by contrast, it seems a much quieter affair. The event of the giving of the Spirit, as for Luke, happens after Jesus' death and resurrection – but it's not a huge public meeting, and not a mighty wind. Instead, the risen Jesus stands among his closest disciples as they huddle in the upper room, and says 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. Then he simply breathes on them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 21: 22). And one of the things I find significant and profoundly helpful about John's way of narrating things is that it makes very clear that the Holy Spirit is nothing other than the Spirit, the life force, the breath of Jesus himself. The Holy Spirit, Alison reminds us, 'is not some vague, numinous force' but 'is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus'.<sup>1</sup> How this matters, its significance for us, is I think something about which Jesus' teaching in the passage we just heard offers some clues. So to this we now turn!

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994), p.28.

Our reading comes once again from the final extended block of teaching in John's gospel – the Farewell Discourse. I said last week that this final teaching is Jesus' way of preparing his disciples for the difficult events of his death and resurrection about to befall. He offers words of instruction, warning and promise, and part of what he promises is that though he's going away, he is not simply abandoning them. 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you'. And a bit later, he says, 'I am going away, *and* I am coming to you'. This coming, the disciples are bemused to hear, will be in the form of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus describes as an Advocate, the Spirit of truth, 'whom the Father will send in my name' and who 'will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you'.

Now, over the weeks we've been exploring this gospel of John, we've noticed that a central theme concerns the sense that Jesus is drawing his disciples onto the inside of what God is doing. It's John who has Jesus say to his disciples, 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (15: 15). For John, in other words, the whole point of Jesus' teaching, his life, death and resurrection, is to enable those who trust in and are led by him to become like him. And specifically, it's to enable them to transcend a merely dualistic way of relating to God – as if God is an object of devotion, outside us and separate from us. Jesus wants his disciples to participate in his own relationship with the one he calls 'Father', become one with him who is one with God, to know that they are in God and God in them.

This is to enter (as John Main puts it) a 'new dimension of spiritual consciousness'. And it means that Jesus' followers are to be so transformed by this union that they can be in the world as he is – the presence of God's own truth and love and life. 'Very truly, I tell you', Jesus has said a few verses earlier, 'the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father'. (14:12). How all this is to be made possible is by the gift of Jesus' own Spirit.

But how is this gift given? Well, Jesus tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit is not simply generically available – floating around in the ether. The Spirit, he says, is given to those who ‘have my commandments and keep them’; only those who ‘love me [and] keep my word’ will receive this gift of divine indwelling. Now, it’s easy for us to hear this as being either unnecessarily exclusive or something like a reward for good behaviour. As if the Spirit of God only comes to those who follow the rules and do what Jesus says – which sounds a rather conditional and controlling offer. But the deeper insight here, I think, is that a certain kind of receptivity if necessary if we’re to recognise and make a home for God in us. This receptivity is dependent on our keeping Jesus’ commandments, which is to say it’s dependent on our availability for love.

I think we can get a sense of how this is so quite easily, in our own experience. In fact, I want to invite you to participate now in a little experiment! I invite you to take a moment to be present to someone you know. Perhaps it’s someone you’re struggling to love or someone whose presence in your life you tend simply to take for granted. Be present to them now in your heart, your thoughts, as best you can in a loving way. Not denying what you find difficult, not pretending they’re perfect – but just as best you can letting them be, seeing them whole – as God might see them, letting go for a moment the story you tell about them, your difficulty with them. What happens? Do you have a sense of some spaciousness happening – around them? within you? in the space between you? Do you have a sense of softening, opening, possibility? Alison writes: ‘The Holy Spirit is a divine reality who works on a human level, and our best approach to understanding what goes on is not to let go of the human level, but to allow that level to be deepened’.<sup>2</sup>

‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate [a Helper], to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive’. Jesus doesn’t say the Spirit is withheld from the world – he just says that those who do not keep his word, which is

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<sup>2</sup> Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, pp.28-29.

to say, those who do not seek to love and deepen their loving, cannot receive it. The Spirit cannot be given to and cannot dwell in, those who are hard of heart, who've closed themselves off. But to those who open themselves to love, even a little, Jesus says, 'we will come to them and make our home with them'.

And this brings us back to John's essential theme. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not about believers having a special spiritual experience, a warm fuzzy feeling, or a sense of superior holiness. It is very particularly to enable our participation in Jesus' communion with the Father, to be more fully caught up in it and become capable of reflecting in our lives the love between them which is continuously poured out towards and received from the other. And what we need to recognise is that in a world that's fearful and defended and clings to identity on its own terms; that too often prefers to deny solidarity than change its destructive ways; in a world that would rather rely on habits of violence and control, than take a risk to be reconciled and forgiven, this is a risky way to be. Jesus came to make visible the self-giving love of God in the midst of the world's confusion and violence, and was cast out, crucified; but God's love cannot be extinguished and he comes again and again with the same offer of liberation and life. To receive the gift of his Spirit, to allow it to be breathed in us, is to consent to share and bear this same vocation.

So when Jesus says to his disciples: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you', it's not a free pass out of trouble, not a guarantee of undisturbed life. The peace he gives is 'not as the world gives'. Rather, it's the capacity, the empowerment to be in the midst of all the world's trouble as he is, sourced in the Source of all, inextinguishably connected to love, and poured out that all might live. This is what Christian life is about – it's what the church, constituted by the gift of the Spirit, is to be, a community joined with him in making manifest the love of God and helping to realise it ... right here ... and now.