

30 May 2020

New Birth into a Living Hope (Acts 2: 1-18)

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During the liturgical season of Easter – the 50 days from Easter Sunday to the Feast of Pentecost – the church reflects on the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This year, we’ve been exploring the meaning of this Christ event in dialogue with the text of 1 Peter. This New Testament letter begins with the announcement that believers have been given ‘a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’ (1.3). Because of this new birth, according to Peter, members of the Christian community are called to a new *quality* of life: ‘as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “you shall be holy, for I am holy”’.

Over the past few weeks, I’ve emphasized a number of key themes relating to this notion of ‘holy living’ or what I’ve been calling ‘the shape of Christian virtue’. We’ve seen, for example, that on Christian understanding there is an intrinsic relationship between prayer, faith and moral life. We do not become virtuous, we do not become ‘good’, simply by following a set of moral rules or a moral system, or by cultivating certain socially or religiously approved ways of being. According to the witness of the New Testament, we cannot ‘construct’ a good life. Theologian David Ford insists that in relation to Christian ethics: ‘There is something more fundamental than that sort of action’. What is required, ‘is more like the “active passivity” of letting ourselves be embraced, or letting ourselves be fed the food and drink that can energize us for virtue’.¹ Christian virtues are what grow in us as we open ourselves to the being, to the life of God. They are primarily a fruit of grace, rather than effort.

¹ David Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997, 2004), p.93.

A second key theme follows from this. It is that Christian moral life is essentially relational and responsive. We are seeking to conform our selves, our being to the being of God, to listen deeply for the will of God – in other words, to be ‘obedient’. And what’s critical here is that the notion of obedience is itself transformed. Rather than the traditional hierarchical concept of obedience most of us grew up with: “Do this because I say so and I have authority over you”, the ‘obedience’ we’re to practise is modelled on Jesus’ obedience to the Father. It’s not forced submission to an alien will, but free acceptance of that in which our fullest life consists. It’s involves vital attunement and maximal receptivity to the true source of our life, as the branches are connected to the vine.

Out of this practice of obedience, we find ourselves growing into a new intimacy with God. This intimacy is reflected in the emergence in us of what are called the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. **And** we find ourselves growing into a different kind of relationship with each other. The more deeply attuned we are to God in love and trust, the more the quality of our listening for and communion with others is transformed. 1 Peter speaks of people who are purified by their obedience to God having ‘genuine mutual love’ for one another – and from here flow the virtues of true generosity, humility, justice, courage and patience. These ways of being enable a certain kind of human community – one characterized by its commitment to liberating and empowering all its members. As we share and are formed in this life with one another, so we bring a different energy and imagination to our participation in the life of the world.

All this is what characterizes life in the Spirit. And in a different idiom, the same themes are picked up in tonight’s reading from Acts. Where 1 Peter speaks of the impact of the Spirit’s presence over time in the life of disciples, our reading from Acts narrates the coming of the Spirit as an event. But the effect is the same. With the coming of God’s Spirit, persons are radically reconnected with God and so with each other. Suddenly people hear others speaking in ways that they can understand – and understand not via translation, but directly: ‘each one heard them speaking in

the *native* language of each'. As if there's immediate apprehension of meaning, deep listening. Interestingly and importantly, the text does not imagine the Spirit enabling everyone to speak a single language – creating unity out of *uniformity*. Rather, differences are retained but no longer have power to divide or keep people separated. This is why the gift of speaking in tongues is interpreted as undoing the division and dispersion of the world's peoples that followed from humanity's ego-ic self-assertion symbolized by the construction of the Tower of Babel. The Spirit acts to create community and real communication.

And just as 1 Peter understands this coming of the Holy Spirit as a beginning, 'a new birth into a living hope', so Acts sees it as the opening of a new chapter in the human story, which is characterized by a new way of seeing things: 'your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams'. It's characterized too by a renewed access to the mind of God: 'your sons and your daughters shall prophesy'; an access now available to everyone, without distinction: 'Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy'.

So this is what the church proclaims is the culmination of the Christ event. Jesus came among us, the enfleshment of God's very being. He lived a certain life, died at the hands of those threatened by his truth and mercy, and was raised from death to liberate all from fear and threat. At a certain point, after the Resurrection, the disciples begin to experience themselves empowered directly by his risen life. The Spirit of God which had sustained and empowered him, is now poured out on those who follow him, poured out to enable his continued presence and work on earth. And so is born the church and mission and a sense of time as oriented towards the fulfilment of God's creative promise and purpose. And I wonder where you feel yourself in this story, how it is real to you (or not) in the lived experience of these days?

What has been striking me recently is the sense in which to be born into this 'living hope' is to be precipitated into a liminal space. With the resurrection of Jesus, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, hope dawns as the in-breaking of possibility in a

world not yet wholly conformed to the love and life of God. Hope arrives as the energy to participate in its realization – ‘your kingdom come’. In this liminal space, we can neither settle down uncritically with the world as it is, nor be complacently assured that ‘she’ll be right’ independently of our awakening and involvement. So the coming of the Spirit creates in us radical trust in God’s goodness, while at the same time making us more rather than less exposed to the suffering of the world.

I think many of us sense that the world’s current crisis is also a ‘liminal’ time. Pope Francis has recently described the present moment as a ‘propitious time’ to be open to the Spirit, who can ‘inspire us with a new imagination of what is possible’. The Spirit, he says, does not allow herself ‘to be closed in or manipulated by fixed or outmoded methods or decadent structures’ but rather moves us to ‘make new things’.² In many areas of life we are sensing a profound shifting of consciousness underway. Young men and women are seeing visions, and old men and women are dreaming dreams; sons and daughters, indigenous and non-indigenous, rich and poor, from East and West and every language and nation under heaven are prophesying. Millions of people are recognizing the truth that only as we truly share the life of earth with our fellow creatures, only as we are truly reconciled as a human family, only as injustice is acknowledged and repented of and a profound sense of mutual belonging awakened, will any of us truly live. As with any movement of the Spirit, we face a strong counter-movement. Those possessed by the energy of ego-ic self-assertion, of falsehood, inertia and violence are threatened by the Spirit, and seek to preserve themselves by shoring up division, creating confusion, and fomenting mis-communication. We are facing as did the disciples at that first Pentecost, a time of crisis – a tipping point. We are undergoing the labour pains of a new birth into a living hope. Let us be courageous in our prayer to call upon the power of God to release us all from bondage, and to set the whole earth free. Come, Holy Spirit, come!

² Gerard O’Connell, ‘Pope Francis shares his vision for Covid-19 aftermath’, *America: the Jesuit Review*, April 17, 2020, (<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/04/17/pope-francis-shares-his-vision-covid-19-aftermath>).