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Receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2. 1-24, 32-33)

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The last few weeks, we've been reading tales from the Acts of the Apostles – which we could equally call the Acts of the Holy Spirit. We've focused primarily on the human characters and their transformation in these stories. But it's really the Holy Spirit who's understood to be the prime agent and effect of the events narrated. In each case, the action is set in motion by the Spirit, and it climaxes at the point when the Spirit is given, or poured out, on those involved. And today, as we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost which remembers the initial outpouring of this Spirit on the community of Jesus' disciples, I want to touch on a conundrum or tension that's raised by all this. It's a conundrum that's got something to do with the chicken and the egg!

Our tradition speaks of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, as having been present and active in the world from the very beginning. In one of the Hebrew creation myths, for example, the Holy Spirit, the breath or wind of God, broods over the abyss to bring forth creation out of nothing. The same Spirit comes upon the prophets, enabling them to know and proclaim God's will, and in Ezekiel's vision, breathes life into the dry bones of Israel (Ezekiel 37. 1-14). She later broods over the womb of Mary, drives Jesus out into the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry and now is poured out on the embryonic Christian community to animate and guide it. The Spirit, in other words, is vastly prior to Jesus' human life, prior to the church.

And yet, at least according to the Acts of the Apostles, the giving of the Spirit is intrinsically connected to the ministry of Jesus' disciples. In the story of Peter and Cornelius, for example, it's clear that God has been well and truly at work in Cornelius's life, independently of Peter's visit. And yet, it's only when Peter shares the news of Jesus' death and resurrection, that 'the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard

the word'. Similarly, later in the book of Acts, when the apostle Paul comes to the town of Ephesus, he asks a group of disciples: 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit' (Acts 19.2). Only when Paul baptises them 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' does 'the Holy Spirit come upon them' (Acts 19.6). But if the Holy Spirit has been active in the world from the beginning, how can it be that its reception is now dependent on the news of Jesus and the mediation of the church? Why doesn't the Spirit just fall on Cornelius or come upon those believers in Ephesus, as God's gift, independently of them encountering Peter and Paul and coming to 'believe' the gospel?

Well, if we were to approach this question cynically, we might interpret the apostles' sense of their necessary role here as something like a grab for power. Only as you come through us, only as you adopt our framework and accept our sacraments, may the Spirit of God come upon you. At times the church has indeed said such things. The claim that 'outside the church, there is no salvation' has been one way of expressing it. In our day, however, this assertion of exclusive ecclesial control of the Spirit has led to a significant backlash. Most of us, I think, would take for granted that the Spirit of God is available and discernible well beyond the edges of the visible church – she's there in nature, speaking in other spiritual and religious traditions, and empowering the manifold varieties of human goodness.

But if this is so, then how are we to understand the testimony of the early church that reception of the Spirit *is* somehow importantly (perhaps even necessarily) connected to faith in the person of Jesus? Is it just a grab for power? Or is there some other wisdom to be discerned here? Well, as you might imagine, this is deep theological territory ... and we're not going to cover it in any depth! But let's see where the question leads!

What if we start by not ascribing cynical motives to the disciples? What if we take seriously their testimony that they've found themselves unexpectedly on the inside of something powerful and new, something they experience as connected to

the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? The book of Acts depicts him as having promised the disciples they would receive something after he had gone from among them: 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). Similarly, in John's gospel, the disciples are promised by Jesus in his final teaching: 'The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you' (John 14. 26). And again, 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16. 12, 14).

In other words, the promised Spirit is supposed to enable the disciples to deepen their reception of Jesus' meaning and his way. How will the Spirit do this? Not by giving them a script, but by infusing their lives. This Spirit of God is the Spirit that was in Jesus. As they receive it, it will reproduce his life in theirs. They will know him by becoming like him. And thus they will become witnesses to his life in the same way that Jesus is the witness of God's life.¹

If we bring this lens to the passage we heard tonight, what do we notice? At first, what might strike us are the pyrotechnics. There came from heaven 'a sound like the rush of a violent wind' which filled the entire house; 'divided tongues, as of fire' appear; and they all begin to speak in other languages. But if we look again, we also see an extraordinarily powerful recreation of human community made possible through transformative change in the apostles themselves. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that was in Jesus, suddenly they are enabled to communicate in ways that those other to them 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 – communion. 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

¹ See James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1993), p.27.

divide or keep people separated. And doesn't that look like the way Jesus was? Isn't that the change in human relations that Jesus sought to make possible? So this suggests that there is an internal connection between Jesus and the gift and work of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us back to the question I asked at the beginning. How are we to hold together our sense that the Holy Spirit has been active in the world from the beginning and is not confined to the church, with the New Testament's understanding that receiving the Spirit is somehow vitally connected with the name of Jesus. Let me offer a modest proposal for reconciling this conundrum!

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. If Jesus makes more visible God's essential nature, then in the same way he makes more visible the Spirit's essential nature. There is nothing un-Christlike in God, and so nothing un-Christlike in the Holy Spirit.

I believe that this Christ-like Spirit is at work always and everywhere, whether or not we know the name of Jesus. She 'blows where she wills', and is quite capable of acting apart from any human mediation. At the same time, my experience is that our receptivity to the Spirit is powerfully enhanced the more we are willing to receive our lives (as Jesus did) wholly from God. In practice, this will mean getting to the end of our human self-sufficiency, letting go of ourselves, undergoing something like the dynamic of death and resurrection. And this, I think, is the connection the disciples discovered between 'the name of Jesus' and fuller reception of God's Spirit. For his story witnesses to the truth that it's only as we get to the limit of our own resources, that we most deeply encounter God. And his story enables *them* to consent to be in that place.

Sometimes, as you know, we enter this place of limit and poverty willingly – through practices of self-forgetting prayer, generosity, unbinding, truth-seeking. Sometimes life itself takes us there – as it took the disciples in the aftermath of Jesus' death, as it's taken many of us by way of grief, trauma, failure and need. However, it happens, it's as we learn to entrust ourselves here that we become able finally to receive the fullness of the gift God wills to give. And that gift just is the Spirit, God's

self-giving life in, and transforming, ours. We can be on this path, without knowing anything of Jesus – as perhaps were Cornelius and those believers at Ephesus. They have already been touched by desire for God, they've begun turning in the direction of fuller life. But coming to know Jesus more, connecting more deeply to his way, this enables in them a process of deepening conversion and receptivity that culminates with their being joined to God and to one another in outpouring love and joy. This is the way we too are on. May we know its power and truth.