

“Renewable Energy” – Acts 2:1-21 – Pentecost

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” This chaotic scene described in Acts has to be one of the most misinterpreted pieces of scripture. At the heart of misusing this particular piece of scripture is the all-too-human desire to be the first, or the best, or both. Sadly this desire motivates people as strongly in the church as in any other human organization. While elsewhere in life the results of this desire show up as attempts to impress with wealth, with beauty, with power, or with cleverness, in the church it most often surfaces as attempts to impress with being more faithful, more devout, more pious, or more spiritual than others.

There’s a huge irony in this in that such claims of being the most spiritual or the only true spiritual part of the church most often arise out of a misunderstanding of the description in Acts of the Pentecost event of conferring the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. The excitement and high spirits of that moment get misaligned today into claims that unbounded excitement is a necessary mark of the Spirit, although most often that excitement has to be bounded into very prescribed actions, including using upraised hands as some kind of divine antennas. I must confess the image that I see is that of a group of children saying “ooh! ooh! pick me, pick me!” I don’t think that’s quite what Paul had in mind when he wrote in our reading from his letter to the Romans about the faithful being “children of God.” Now I really don’t have anything against various hand gestures as being representative of a sense of the Spirit moving within – but I do object to those who claim – or as is more often the case, subtly imply – that not using such hand gestures indicates a lack of the Spirit moving within! I think the Spirit enters us in many ways, even through our hearts and minds and not exclusively through our fingers.

In a similar way, speaking in tongues is now usually taken to mean uttering gibberish that only God can understand, and some faithful people take such behaviour as the only way of being declared a Christian. I often wish that people who fall into this mode of excited and exclusive behaviour would actually read their bibles instead of waving or thumping them! When you carefully read the text you discover that according to scripture such utterances are valid only when there is someone present to translate; and more especially that in the Pentecost event in Acts the tongues spoken were “natural languages”, with people present who could understand those languages. And lest there be any doubt or confusion, the text lists the languages that were used! And if anyone should believe that suddenly being able to speak in another language isn’t miracle enough, I would invite that person to try learning Korean!

I guess we can understand why various churches would be keen to associate themselves with the Pentecost event. It seems clear that for Luke the Pentecost event was the real beginning of the church. Luke was obviously well aware of the conflicts boiling in the church as to who was the first, who was the best, and even who was the only, and so it was vitally important to him to relate the Pentecost event at the very beginning of the document that details the growth and expansion of the church throughout the whole known world. For Luke it was crucial to point out that the beginning of the church was not a people-event, but a God-event, an event that although with global impact could only occur in one place, the holy city of Jerusalem. From there the church would expand and grow, through Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth like expanding ripples on a pond when a stone is thrown in; but for Luke it could only have started in Jerusalem.

And for him also the birth of the church was – and could only be – God-inspired, delivered with the arrival of the promised Comforter, Counselor, Advocate, supporter and sustainer, the Holy Spirit delivered as promised by God. Not in isolation, of course, not as a

spontaneous and unconnected event, but as the sealing of the new covenant in Christ, the fulfillment of the promise made by the One who was himself the fulfillment of God's promise of mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, if the answer to the question of "who formed the first church?" is God, and the answer to the question, "where did it begin?" is Jerusalem, the only question that remains is "who is part of, or who makes up the real church?" The answer to that important question is also given by Luke, as he quotes Peter quoting the prophet Joel, "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ...", and "Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Don't you find it fascinating that the very people who proclaim the loudest that we are "in the last days" are almost always the very ones who also proclaim loudly that "not all shall be saved", meaning of course those who do not call upon the name of the Lord in the same way that they do? The text seems pretty simple and clear and unambiguous. The declaration from God through Joel and Peter is not conditional other than "calls on the name of the Lord", and everyone who satisfies that one condition is saved. Those who would argue that "not everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" can only then claim that we are not really in the last days, but then the promise of God pouring out his Spirit upon all flesh would still be an unfulfilled promise, and that is clearly the opposite of what the Pentecost event was all about.

Well then, how do we determine who is part of the 'real' church? Paul answers that question fully in his letter to the Romans, and he is clear that "all who are led by the Spirit are children of God." How can we tell who's led by the Spirit? What are those marks? We don't have to guess – they are listed in scripture. The outward signs of the Spirit working within us are called the "fruits of the Spirit" and are listed in Galatians 5:22-23 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Hmmm – self-control – isn't that the opposite of unrestrained enthusiasm? Generosity – isn't that the opposite of exclusiveness, and selfishness? Joy – isn't that the opposite of pessimism and negativity? Gentleness and kindness – aren't those the opposites of hurtful and rejecting? Are these inclusive and loving characteristics not the real "high spirits" with which we are called to celebrate God's love in Christ?

Of course these signs of the Spirit are indeed the very characteristics that will reveal the Holy Spirit working within us. But how do we let or better yet help that to happen? There are several ways in which we can bring that about; the first is to acknowledge the reality of the Holy Spirit. We all do that in our confession of faith called the Apostles' Creed ("I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, ...) but here I'm talking about not only believing in the existence of the Spirit but also about believing that the Spirit is here, and active in our lives – including yours.

Next is the deliberate action of inviting the Holy Spirit into your life, to guide and direct you. That is at one and the same time both very easy and very difficult to do. Easy to do in the sense that all that is required is a bit of desire for it to happen, and a bit of prayer as an invitation. Really difficult to do in that we either don't want to give up any control we think we have over our lives or we don't want to appear to be some kind of religious 'nut'! The best advice I can offer here is 'relax' ... it doesn't hurt, and God will not set out to make a fool of you.

The third step or practice in inviting and helping the Holy Spirit to live and work in you to God's glory is to listen. Most of us are so busy telling God that we know what God should do and how God should do it that we don't stop to listen to hear what God is urging us to do through the Holy Spirit. It is in carefully listening that we become open to hearing those little flashes that

tell us, “no, stop what you’re doing and do this instead” and inspire us to graceful and loving behaviour. When we calm the chatter in our head about how God can fix a situation we are then able to hear the insight from the Spirit that will guide us through to a much more fulfilling solution than the ones we had invented. It is when we actually let the Holy Spirit lift our spirits that we can truly enjoy life to the fullest and exhibit the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And unlike the impression given in Acts, this is no one-time limited offer ... God’s Holy Spirit is the original source of renewable energy, always available for us to draw upon, and always more than sufficient for any occasion.

It is true that we are human, and thus we are sinners, and therefore we cannot be perfectly true to the gift of the Spirit working within us. However, as we are able to show love, or joy, or peace, or patience, or kindness, or generosity, or self-control we are showing evidence of God’s Holy Spirit at work in us, and can know that we are indeed children of God. This gift of the Spirit is for us; it will not be revoked; our salvation is sure. But this gift is not ours alone, for it belongs to everyone who calls on the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who promised – and delivered – the counselor, the comforter , the Holy Spirit.