

PENTECOST 2011 – 12 JUNE 2011 – ZAGREB EP – THE HOLY SPIRIT
Psalm 104:24 – end, Acts 2:1 - 21, 1 Corinthians 12: 3b – 13, John 20:19 – 23

A Sermon preached at the Anglican Chaplaincy of Zagreb by Peter Bolton

Creation

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.¹

In the beginning was the Holy Spirit of God. Today's Psalm, 104, verses 29 and 30 says *When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their **breath**, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your **spirit**, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.* The Hebrew word for "breath" is the same as the Hebrew word for "spirit". When God created the universe, the Holy Spirit was at the centre of the creative process.

The Psalm is talking about creation in a different sense – the creation of individual living beings. When God creates an individual, he sends forth his spirit, his breath, and the individual become alive, when he takes away the person's breath (or spirit) he or she ceases to be alive. The Spirit of God, the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit, is at the centre of the creation of all that is – much as Jesus Christ is :- *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made²* – so the Spirit of God, the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit, is at the centre of the creative activity of God, both in general, and in the particular sense of the creation of you and me.

..and Re-creation

The reading from St John's gospel extends the idea of creation to re-creation. The Christian gospel announces the arrival of a new humanity which follows in the footsteps of the resurrected Christ into a new kind of life. In an echo of the creation story when God breathed into Adam's nostrils, when the resurrected Jesus in John 20 sent out the disciples to begin their work he *breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit...."* Thus the Holy Spirit enabled not just the creation of humanity but the re-creation of humanity as the followers of the risen Christ.

Control

A second point that is key to our understanding of the Spirit is about control – or rather the lack of it. We would all like to be in control of our lives. Much of what we humans do is dedicated to the control of our appearance, our schedules, our reputations, so that there is no room for nasty surprises coming from somewhere outside ourselves. In my professional life, I tend to over-prepare for what I do, so that everything goes according to plan, so that I am not seen to fail. Does this work? What do you think? Projectors don't work, people don't turn up to meetings. I can't control the environment around me. The great human project to control our world, to get it to do what we want it to do, does not work. My desperate attempt to control my day to day life, just like the human project to control the world is *like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew*

¹ Genesis 1:1 - 2

² John 1:1 - 3

*and beat against that house, and it fell -- and great was its fall!"*³ The wind symbolises our lack of control **and** our lack of knowledge. *The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*⁴ We don't know where it's going and it stops what we are doing – it blows our washing down or throws our garden parties into disarray. That Hebrew word for breath and spirit also means wind, and so the NRSV translates the beginning of Genesis as a **wind** from God swept over the face of the waters.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. The disciples were all together in one place and suddenly they lost control of their lives. Everything was different – instead of quietly doing whatever they had been doing, they found themselves preaching in languages that they had not known that they knew.

But there's another kind of loss of control here too – signified by that sneering comment from the sophisticated people of Jerusalem, the capital city - *Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?* Galilee was a northern region, far from the capital. As if sophisticated Londoners were to refer to bumpkins from Barnsley – what can **they** tell us about God? (I'm not sure what the equivalent would be in Croatia!) Religious authority resided in the priestly authorities in Jerusalem, not in upstart fishermen and peasants from Galilee. The religious leaders have lost control – any ordinary person can now speak with the authority of God. As Peter points out when he addresses the crowd and quotes the prophet Joel, *I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,....not just Jewish people. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.* Slaves will speak God's word, not just religious leaders. All of us can share something unique that we have received from God through the inspiration of his spirit.

Community

Which brings me to the third key point about the spirit – community. In his first letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul talks a lot about the Spirit – it is the Spirit that enables to acknowledge that *“Jesus is Lord”*, and it is the Spirit which allots different gifts to each individual in the church. The gifts are given to each and every member of the church, not for our own benefit but, as it says in verse 7 of tonight's reading, *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

Some of the gifts in Paul's lists of gifts in his various letters could be regarded as specifically “supernatural”, like the working of miracles, but some of them are much more prosaic, like “administration”, “helping” or simply “giving”. Over the years the church has debated which of these gifts are the most important and indeed which of them are supposed to be manifest today as opposed to the New Testament period; it is a sad irony that arguments about the Holy Spirit, which is supposed to have a unifying function, helping each individual to make their contribution to the church as a whole, have resulted in so many divisions in the church - right the way from the Montanists⁵ in the 2nd century to the modern differences over the Pentecostal churches and the Charismatic movement. The Spirit is there to create unity,

³ Matthew 7:26 - 27

⁴ John 3:8

⁵ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montanism>

community, communion, within the church, not division - *For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.* In the final words of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the Corinthian church of the key characteristics of God, and in the case of the Spirit it is this notion of communion, sharing, fellowship that he draws attention to:- *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*⁶

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⁶ 2 Corinthians 13:14