

### Sermon Feast of Pentecost 2023

I recently heard of someone who had thought to invite their neighbours to a church service. It might have been to a Christmas carol service, or something harmless and non-threatening like that. This person had said of their neighbours (and presumably why they thought they could be invited to church), 'They are religious, but it doesn't show.' Of course, *we* ought to be in a position where it might be said of us, 'Yes they are religious and it *does* show!' But we know the sentiment behind the former. Religion and faith and spirituality (whatever your preference) should be private and interior, and that it should not show. And if it does, not in an overt or explicit way. But it is such attitudes that have left the church so impoverished and diminished in our cultural context. What is the point of an invisible faith? What is the point of an apologetic, embarrassed faith? What is the point of a faith that cannot be seen?

When Saint Luke comes to describe the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, he uses two key images to communicate what was going on. The disciples have been obedient to the Lord's command, *to stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high*. That promised power manifests itself *as a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were sitting*. And then *divided tongues, as of fire* descended upon each of them. Of course, both these images – of wind and of fire – convey the power and *disruptive* force of the Spirit. We might even say the *destructive* force of the Spirit. The Spirit inaugurates something new. Something must be cleared away – burnt up, blown away – so that a new thing might be brought into being. From that day, for the disciples, there was no possibility of an invisible, hidden faith. Though for us the Holy Spirit might seem something impossibly intangible, unseen, ethereal and elusive, it is actually anything but.

This is of course the point of describing the Spirit as One who comes as *the rush of a violent wind*. The analogy is well-known, but worth repeating. We cannot see the wind, but we can feel and see its effects. The trees sway, the leaves rustle, the rubbish skips down the street. It throws off spray from an approaching wave and moves the clouds along in the sky. But it is worth noting that Saint Luke here does not describe a gentle breeze upon the cheek! It is the rush of a violent wind. We must think more of a tornado! A storm! A force that can rip off roofs and uproot trees. It is a wind that leaves an impact. It ravishes and can in fact destroy. Importantly, *it is noticed*.

In his letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul tells us quite simply what the life of the Spirit looks like. And this spirit-filled life is not just for those first disciples huddled together in Jerusalem but for all who assent to the lordship of Christ and seek to follow him. Paul writes, *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.* You may well remember this from Sunday School or your own confirmation classes. I remember it from high school as a scripture verse the whole class had to memorize and recite. It is an important verse because it reminds us that the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives *looks like* something. The Holy Spirit is not just some vague concept we give assent to in our creed, but a personal power that forms and changes lives. Saint Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit of course echoes Our Lord's own words in Matthew's Gospel: *by their fruits you shall know them.* Oh! That we might be known by our fruits of *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control!*

As I mentioned earlier, at the end of Luke's gospel Our Lord promised his disciples that they would be clothed with power from on high. What Saint Paul outlines as the 'fruits of the Spirit' tells what shape that power takes in the lives of believers. In other words, when the life of God takes hold of us it is tangible. It looks like something. It has practical expression. It changes lives in real and concrete ways.

Just look at the radical transformation that occurred that Pentecost day. It is a shame that the first reading for this feast from the Book of Acts never includes the rest of Chapter Two. What follows the account we hear today includes Peter's strident proclamation of the gospel to the crowd in Jerusalem. This is a changed Peter. Remember, just a few brief weeks before this, he had denied our Lord and abandoned him. Peter's own transformation but reflects what is true for all the apostles and martyrs. The Spirit was a living power for them. By their fruits, we truly *do* know them. And it is only by their fruits that we are here today.

The fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience and the rest - might sound to us all terribly tame and underwhelming. But if we pause to consider, it is precisely these fruits that make life in this world tolerable! It is not humanity's deluded march toward progress that will make life better for us. It will not be AI or other technological advancements. It will not be more money or more leisure or more gadgets that enrich human existence. But precisely those things which St Paul identifies as the fruits of a Spirit-filled life.

If we doubt this, then we only need to look where faith has been expelled, where the power and presence of God has been banished from public life and public decision-making. Man is a meaning-making creature. Exclude God from that process of meaning-making and we are left with a grim, materialistic alternative, indeed a dangerous alternative. And an alternative that is loveless, joyless, selfish, and cruel.

Last year stories surfaced about patients in Canada choosing euthanasia because they couldn't afford housing or the healthcare or supports they needed to keep living. A new article in the Journal of Medical Ethics argues that people who find themselves in these situations (that is, experiencing poverty, lack of support, loneliness etc.) should not be prevented from accessing euthanasia because to do so would only 'cause more harm'. Euthanasia, in the report's own words, is simply the 'lesser of two evils'.

It appears that a disturbingly high percentage of people in Canada agree with the authors of that report, with 41 % saying they would support access to euthanasia on the grounds of poverty, 28 % of people surveyed agreed with providing euthanasia on the grounds of homelessness, 43 % for mental illness, and perhaps most shockingly, 50 % for disability. For those aged between 18-34 years, there was even greater support for these proposed extensions to euthanasia eligibility. The younger you are the more likely you are to have no faith or religious commitment, and more likely to agree to a world that thinks killing people off is better than providing them with care, compassion, and support. I could give a million and one other examples. But this is the world we face. This is the world of a post-Christian society. It is hard to see where the argument goes that we are better off without Christianity. Canada has abandoned its poor, its sick, and its vulnerable and instead said to them they are better off dead. And it highlights that the further we drift from our Christian foundations a gimmer and more callous world is created. Do not think we are far behind in this country. The recent forced acquisition of Calvary Hospital in Canberra by the Territory government highlights what little tolerance there is in some jurisdictions - even in this country - for institutions with a convinced position of faith.

The Spirit that was poured out on the disciples on the day of Pentecost transformed their lives. It changed them. And it can change us. Those who have lived in the power of the Spirit have been a power for good. The Spirit of God is a power that can change – and has changed – the world. Now, as ever, that Spirit is needed to cleanse, heal and renew the face of the earth. Amen.