

Pentecost: Listening to the Voice of the Spirit – The call for an ecological reformation

Sermon Notes, Knox Church, Dunedin
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Texts: John 3: 1-21; Romans 8: 1-26

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit in a new, remarkable, and transformative way a few weeks after Jesus resurrection and ascension. It is a day to reflect on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity or the ‘go-between God’ – to use the words of John Taylor, the former Bishop of Winchester. It is the Holy Spirit who unites God and humanity in the bonds of divine love and who draws us towards the deep and everlasting love between the Father and the Son. As John Calvin put it in his *Institutes*: ‘The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself ... he unites himself to us by the Spirit alone’.¹

At Pentecost we are reminded of both the fruit and gifts of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit – as the Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23) – are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The gifts of the Spirit, discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, include wisdom, knowledge, faith, discernment, and healing, the power to do miracles and to prophesy, the ability to speak in different kinds of languages or tongues, and the related ability to explain or interpret what those speaking in tongues are saying.

Both the fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit are vital for the mission, witness, and health of the church – the body of Christ – and we need to open our hearts daily to the Spirit so that God can transform and renew our inner beings – on a daily basis. As we receive the Spirit’s gifts and are empowered to exhibit the Spirit’s fruit, so too we are enabled and equipped to be ministers of the Gospel of Peace in this needy and fragile world. Our prayer must always be: ‘Come Holy Spirit’ – ‘come Holy Spirit that we may be filled with your redeeming love, wisdom, and liberating power’.

This morning I want to reflect on what the Spirit is saying to the church and the world today. What, for instance, is the Spirit saying to God’s people here in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and more specifically here in Dunedin? If we were truly and prayerfully listening to the Spirit of God, what would be heard? And how might we know that we were hearing correctly and not suffering from self-deception or wishful thinking? What criteria might we use to detect the voice of the Holy Spirit, and distinguish the Spirit from the cacophony of other voices and all the background noise of our culture?

There are some thoughtful answers to these questions in an inspiring collection of essays called ‘The Holy Spirit in the World Today’ edited by Jane Williams, the wife of the former Archbishop of Canterbury.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1 and III.3

Contributors include Jurgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, Rowan Williams and David Ford. Drawing on these essays, I want to reflect on how we might discern the Spirit's voice and then apply this to our current global and local context – one that is marked by much suffering and many problems, not least a grave ecological crisis – a crisis that calls for nothing less than an ecological reformation and a new kind of ecological citizenship.

In terms of discerning the Spirit's voice or activity in our lives, whether individually or corporately, there are at least four tests:

First, there is the witness of Scripture: do the apparent promptings of the Spirit resonate with what we know of the purposes and heart of God as revealed in the Scriptures and especially through the teaching, passion, and resurrection of Christ?

Second, and related to this, is there a call to show love: are we being prompted to servanthood and suffering or, alternatively, to safety, security, and personal satisfaction. Are we being invited to experience a deeper and fuller humanity, one that entails an element of kenosis: that is, self-emptying, self-giving, and personal sacrifice? Are we being challenged to participate wholeheartedly in God's love – a suffering, yearning and longing love – or are we being urged to escape the constraints and demands of a needy world?

Third, is there an element of surprise or the unexpected? Is there a call for new birth? Are we being urged to experience the discomfort and birth-pangs of new life, the risk of pain, the uncertainty of new ways of living, and the disruption of comfortable patterns? Remember, what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John's Gospel: 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit'. The Spirit moves freely and in mysterious ways. We find the Spirit constantly busting into our world in creative, unusual, and almost reckless ways, inspiring new initiatives and new social movements.

Finally, is there an element of judgement? In John's Gospel Jesus tells his disciples that one of the Spirit's roles is to 'convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgement'. The Spirit, in other words is the **Holy Spirit** – the one who seeks holiness, purity, and wholeness.

In short, in discerning the 'signs of the Spirit', we should be asking the following questions: is the message consistent with the Gospel; is there a call to love; is there a call to be more Christ-shaped, including a personal cost; and is there an element of judgement – the exposing of evil and a call to repentance?

To quote Simeon Zahl, a theologian at Oxford University:

One of the most reliable ways in which the Spirit acts in our lives is through 'negative', cruciform [or cross-shaped] experiences: through suffering, the thwarting of our ego, and the uncomfortable disruption of usual patterns of relating to the world, to each other, and to God.

The ecological crisis

There are no doubt many, many things which the Holy Spirit is saying to the church and the world at this time. But almost certainly one of Spirit's most powerful messages is to care better for God's creation, and especially this precious planet which is increasingly blighted by human greed, poor stewardship, and what

many have termed a 'nature deficit disorder'. Apparently, it has been calculated that the average child in Britain spends less time outside buildings than prison inmates.

The scriptures tell us that God rejoices in all that He has made and loves the cosmos – 'for God so loved the world, or cosmos, that He gave His only begotten Son', etc. (John 3: 16). God calls us to show kindness to this world, to treasure its diversity, to care tenderly for its creatures, to tread gently upon the land, and to be good stewards of its resources. Indeed, we are called to love what God has made, just as God loves and cares for it, and to be part of God's great plan of renewal and redemption – a plan for God's will to be done on Earth as in Heaven (the Lord's Prayer).

Unfortunately, we are not loving God's world.

Today, sadly, humanity faces a series of grave ecological crises, both globally and locally. According to leading scientists, several critical planetary boundaries have been exceeded and time is running out to rectify the problem.² As Pope Francis highlighted last year in his deeply moving Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*, we are failing to 'care for our common home'. Our ecological footprints are too large. We are borrowing from the future and leaving our grandchildren a dreadful legacy – a huge, unsustainable ecological debt and colossal, irreversible damage. As Pope Francis put it:

We have come to see ourselves as ... [nature's] lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (*Laudato Si*, pp.3-4), as St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (8:22).

Here in New Zealand our problems include deteriorating water quality, the over-allocation of fresh water supplies, a significant per capita carbon footprint, poor land-use management, weak marine governance, and threats to many native species. Since human settlement about 800 years ago, we have lost 85% of our indigenous forests, over 90% of our wetlands, more than 50 bird species, and masses of valuable soil, and we have significantly polluted at least 60% of our rivers and many of our lakes.

Globally, the situation is grim. The damage includes: widespread habitat destruction and degradation; air, land and water pollution; ozone depletion; soil erosion and desertification; the over-exploitation of scarce natural resources; climate change; ocean acidification; and massive deforestation. In terms of biodiversity loss, the species extinction rate is now estimated at about 1,000 times above the normal background evolutionary rate – about three species every day. Indeed, we are entering the sixth great mass extinction event of the past 540 million years. Such events are where more than 50% of the planet's species are destroyed. The most recent mass extinction was about 65 million years ago. But unlike previous mass extinctions, which were the result of large-scale volcanic eruptions and asteroid impacts, the current event derives from human activity – much of it driven by greed. As the former Pope Benedict XVI observed at his Inaugural Mass in 2005: "The external deserts in the world are growing because our internal deserts have become so vast".³

² See, for instance, Johan Rockström, et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity", *Nature*, 461, 24 September 2009, 472-475; John Rockström, et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity", *Ecology and Society*, 14, 2.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Inaugural Mass*, 24 April 2005.

Bernie Krause, a musician and naturalist, spent four decades making sound recordings of many of the world's most pristine habitats, including some 15,000 species. Unfortunately, the loss of species over recent decades has been so extensive that around half these recordings are now archives – they cannot be repeated either because the relevant habitats have ceased to exist or because they have been totally compromised by human noise. As Krause has put it:

A great silence is spreading over the natural world even as the sound of man is becoming deafening ... Little by little the vast orchestra of life, the chorus of the natural world, is in the process of being quietened.⁴

To compound matters, further environmental harm is now inevitable. This is because of the inertia or long lags in many natural and human systems – the climate system, our energy systems, our transport systems and our political systems. Our carbon emissions today, for example, will have damaging consequences for thousands of years. At current rates of emissions, we are likely to exceed within 25 years the global carbon budget consistent with the internationally agreed warming cap of two degrees celcius. And there is nothing safe about two degrees. It is consistent with a 10 to 15 meter rise in the sea level if we stabilized the planet's temperatures at that point for long enough.

A Christian response

How, as Christians, should we respond to the ecological crisis? What is the Holy Spirit saying to us at this critical time?

First, we must recognize the reality and folly of what we are doing. There are no grounds for denial, complacency or evading the truth. We must heed the best available scientific evidence and respond appropriately.

Second, we must recognize the element of judgement. Our trashing of the planet is sinful. Rather than preserving life, we have 'become death, the destroyer of worlds' (to quote the ancient Hindu holy book, known as the *Bhagavad Gita* – which translates to 'the song of the Lord'). Our response, therefore, should be one of lament, deep sorrow and repentance. Likewise, we must be alert to the power of evil, including the sway of materialism and the urge to leave environmental problems for others to fix. We are all responsible before God for our stewardship of the planet. We are also responsible to one another and for the wellbeing of future generations. Free-riding has no place amongst Christians.

Third, we need an ecological reformation within the church and beyond. This must entail a new recognition that human beings are creatures not Gods; we were made from the dust of the Earth and are an integral part of the created order, not above and beyond it. It must entail a new love for God's world and a willingness to adopt new ways of living, both individually and collectively, and at all levels – as citizens, congregations, in our local communities, within our businesses and places of work, and in our wider contributions to public life. As Christians we should be setting an example and providing leadership, not dragging the chain.

Individually, we must prayerfully consider what the Spirit is urging us to do. It may well be costly and sacrificial; but that is the nature of Christian discipleship and the Spirit's call. All of us should be reducing our

⁴ Quoted by John Vidal, *The Guardian*, 3 September 2012.

carbon and ecological footprints: taking fewer overseas trips and domestic flights, buying more fuel-efficient cars or electric cars, and divesting of shares in companies whose activities are irresponsible environmentally.

Finally, we should not expect that God will miraculously save humanity from a self-inflicted ecologically disaster. To quote the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams:

... to suggest that God might intervene to protect us from the corporate folly of our practices is as unchristian and unbiblical as to suggest that he protects us from the results of individual folly or sin. This is not a creation in which there are no real risks; our [Christian] faith has always held that the inexhaustible love of God cannot compel justice or virtue; we are capable of doing immeasurable damage to ourselves as individuals, and it seems clear that we have the same terrible freedom as a human race.⁵

Nevertheless, as Rowan Williams reminds us, ‘God’s faithfulness stands, assuring us that even in the most appalling disaster, love will not let go’.⁶ Or as Jesus said, “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Moreover, we must never conclude that our efforts to conserve, heal and restore God's creation are worthless. Doing what is right, responding to the Spirit of God, is important and valuable, regardless of the apparent outcomes. When St Paul remarks that ‘our labour in the Lord will not be in vain’ (1 Cor 15:58), he does not imply that our costly strivings will inevitably improve our current circumstances. Rather, he means that they ‘will have effects that will be preserved in the new creation’.⁷ The nature of these effects we may never know. But we must be faithful all the same.

God has given us all the ability – and beckons us all through the Holy Spirit – to work together to heal and restore this afflicted planet, our common home. Let us all pursue this important calling with perseverance and joy. Thanks be to God!

⁵ Rowan Williams *Faith in the Public Square* London, Bloomsbury, 2012, p.190. See also Rowan Williams, “The Climate Crisis: Fashioning a Christian Response”, 13 October 2009.

⁶ Rowan Williams *Faith in the Public Square* London, Bloomsbury, 2012, p.190.

⁷ Richard Bauckham, “Ecological Hope in Crisis?”, p.3.

Canticle of the Creatures (St Francis of Assisi)

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, all praise is yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing. To you, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all you have made, and first my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and through whom you give us light.

How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor; Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

All Praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them, bright, and precious, and fair.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brothers wind and air, and fair and stormy, all the weather's moods, by which you cherish all that you have made.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Water, so useful, humble, precious and pure.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten up the night. How beautiful is he, how cheerful! Full of power and strength.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us, and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through those who grant pardon for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial.

Happy are those who endure in peace, By You, Most High, they will be crowned. All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Death, From whose embrace no mortal can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Happy those she finds doing your will! The second death can do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give him thanks, And serve him with great humility.

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