

The gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Church, Canberra - Pentecost, 31 May 2009

John 16:12-15; Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

It's goose-bumps stuff, hearing again of the day of Pentecost events there in Jerusalem. A sound like the rush of a violent wind filling the house; tongues like fire resting on every one of the men and women gathered there; an eruption of different languages; so much joy and chaos and confusion that people think they're drunk; 3000 people converted that day!

In all of religious history there has never been a day like this. Jesus is no longer physically here on earth, but God has not left. In the gift of the Holy Spirit God makes his presence unequivocally known, and kicks off the growth of the Christian family by gifting Christ's followers with this one-time ability to speak in other languages. God inspires Peter's preaching to the crowd which gathers, and enables the disciples that day to baptize thousands of new Christians.

Whatever we make of those extraordinary events, one thing is absolutely clear. The good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone. The news of God's love and forgiveness, of God's presence and guidance, of God's gifts of abundant and eternal life, are not restricted to that uncertain bunch of Galilean men and women, but they are for everyone. Did you notice how Acts tells us there were people in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost who came "from every nation under heaven", and did you notice how Peter's sermon emphasises that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved". Pentecost tells us God's love and God's action in Jesus Christ is for the whole world.

Pentecost also tells us that God gifts ordinary women and men with talents and abilities which will contribute to God's purposes and provide purpose and fulfilment to Christ's followers. The apostle Paul spells this out more than once in his letters to the early churches which quickly grew around the Mediterranean. To the Romans, the Ephesians, the Corinthians he declares that every Christian receives at least one specific gift of the Holy Spirit which they are to employ in the service of God. "There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, there are varieties of services but the same Lord, there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

So each of us here who claim to be Christian are promised a manifestation of the Spirit - a gift, a talent, at least one, but possibly more than one - which we are to use for the common good. There is no exhaustive list of such gifts in the Bible, but they include gifts such as those of healing, wisdom, administration, encouragement, teaching, prayer.

Today, on this day of Pentecost, we particularly celebrate gifts of music. Many people here today have the gift of singing, and not just those in the choir. Quite a number of people here today have the gift of playing music, be it piano or organ, or violin or cello, or clarinet or oboe or trumpet. Music has always featured in the worship of God, going back at least to Egyptian religion of the 2nd millennium before Christ, from which we have wall paintings depicting the use of lute, harp, horn and drums in

religious worship. In Hebrew worship in Old Testament times, in the temple in Jerusalem in the 1st millennium before Christ, we know there were temple singers plus lute, harp, trumpet, strings, cymbals and drums - all for the praise and worship of God.

Music is often regarded as a gift from heaven. The great reformer and Bible scholar of the 16th century, Martin Luther, said "Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world". The great composer, maybe the greatest of all time, Johann Sebastian Bach, once wrote "The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul". Music connects us with God, for music tunes us into the spiritual, takes us beyond ourselves, lifts us into the realm of feelings and inspiration, embraces us with joy and peace, moves us closer to God. No wonder music features large in Christian worship.

Today then we celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit, God with us, always, every day, with love, with guidance, with inspiration, with peace. And today we celebrate all the gifts granted to the people of God by the Holy Spirit, gifts for ministry and mission, gifts for worship and prayerfulness, gifts which nurture our faith and which enable us to live out our discipleship. They include the gifts of music and song. Thanks be to God. Amen.