

Theme: “ Reflecting Biblically on the Holy Spirit”

Introduction

Today, in one sense, it is the birthday of the church. It is the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon a disparate bunch of followers of Jesus. With the gift of the Holy Spirit they stood firm in their faith, attracted new people and began the missionary work that eventually went forth into all the world.

However to say that the work of the Holy Spirit began at Pentecost is incorrect and we need to have a far broader sense of understanding of the work of the Spirit to make some sense of Pentecost and what continues to be the work of the Spirit.

The character of the Holy Spirit is revealed in the etymology of the word ‘spirit’ in both the Hebrew and the Greek. Both the Hebrew term ‘ruach’ and the Greek word ‘pneuma’ can be rendered ‘wind’ or ‘breath’ as well as ‘spirit’. The nature and movement of wind or breath is analogous to that of Spirit. We cannot see wind; it can move without hindrance. It has power, like that being generated on the wind farm on the far shoreline of Lake George. As we know, the wind causes things to happen, like the currents of the sea. The experience of the Spirit is much like the experience of the wind. Breath, too, can move freely. It has power and causes things to happen. Breath animates, gives life to people and animals.

Likewise, although we cannot see the Spirit, it is present. It has power. It is not confined. It moves across the vast spaces of the cosmos like wind moving across the open fields. The Holy Spirit causes things to happen. On the analogy of breath, writers in the Bible occasionally speak of it filling a person or a community. It animates and gives life to faith within individuals and communities. We have an expression “ there is no life here” referring to an individual or a community which has no vibrancy, no ‘get up and go’ – it has already got up and gone. It is in such situations that the Holy Spirit is needed to infuse new life, new hope and new energy into God’s people.

With this background I would like us to examine three aspects that reveal the work of the Holy Spirit to us:

- the Holy Spirit in the Jewish Scriptures
- the Holy Spirit and Jesus
- the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

The Holy Spirit in the Jewish Scriptures

Sometimes we forget that the Holy Spirit operates in the Jewish Scriptures just as much as in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. We tend to think of the Holy Spirit as the domain of Christians alone. Here are five inter-related ways that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Old Testament.

1. The Spirit is a divine tool in creation and re-creation.

In Genesis 1:2, right at the beginning of our Scriptures we read:

“.....and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters...”

In Hebrew, the Spirit of God is ‘ruach Elohim’ and this is the creative spirit/breath of God which gives life to creation.

Also when the community is ‘as dead’, God re-creates it through the Spirit. An example is Ezekiel 36:26 & 27 where it is said,

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...I will put my Spirit in you....”

2. The Spirit is universally present sustaining the world.

Through the Spirit, God helps the community and upholds the people. We read in Psalm 143:10 – “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.”

3. The Holy Spirit fills or anoints people.

The Spirit moves people to ecstasy and they have an intense awareness of God. Such is the case with Moses and the 70 elders in Numbers 11:25.

4. The Holy Spirit empowers people for specific tasks.

For example, under the influence of the Spirit, Gideon leads the community successfully in Judges 6:33-35. Also the Spirit fills many of the prophets to prepare them to speak God’s words of wisdom and guidance for the community.

5. The Holy Spirit is seen as a sign of God’s coming again.

There will be a righteous apocalyptic event, where the Spirit is seen as part of healing a broken, sinful world. This is particularly seen in some of the inter-testamental books and is present in Malachi and Zechariah. There is a vision for a new era similar to the book of Revelation.

As we see the work of the Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures, suddenly there is the realization that the events of Pentecost are not so strange or even unique. However a change has occurred with Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. So let us look at this.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit

1. The Holy Spirit is at work in the birth of Jesus.

We read of Mary's encounter with the angel in Luke 1:35 – "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Jesus' conception involves the Holy Spirit.

2. The baptism of Jesus confirms that Jesus is filled with the Spirit for his public ministry. In Luke 3:21-22 we read: "...and the Holy Spirit descended on him, in bodily form, like a dove."

3. The Holy Spirit leads Jesus to be tempted by the devil.

Luke 4:1 says: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert...."

4. The Holy Spirit spoke through the instructions of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples.

The disciples were to understand Jesus, their lives and the whole of God's purpose through Moses, the prophets and the writings of the Jewish faith history. It is in this light that Jesus came to them and in John 20:22 "Jesus breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit."

It is with all of this background that we come to the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-21, where the Holy Spirit fills and empowers those present to be strong in their faith and to speak out.

Pentecost

The day of Pentecost is 50 days after the Passover ('pentekostos' being Greek for 'fiftieth') and was a traditional Jewish harvest thanksgiving day (also known as the 'feast of weeks' or 'the day of the first fruits'). The first wheat and barley harvested was presented to God in thanks on this occasion.

The analogy here is that the first of the new fruits is those 120 gathered in the upper room upon whom the Holy Spirit descended. These were the beginnings of the people of God as Christians. They would produce a bountiful harvest as they shared the Good News of Christ as the empowered people, filled with the Holy Spirit.

There is the loud noise of the rushing of the wind along with the tongues of fire that came upon those in that upper room. All of this, the noise, the wind and the fire are symbols of the presence of God's Holy Spirit being poured upon the people of God.

We see the infilling of God's breathe upon the people so that they can speak God's message and the tongues of fire symbolise the purification of the people for God's purpose.

The coming of God's Spirit was both audible and visible and brought people onto the streets.

This gave Peter the opportunity to tell them all what was happening and why and he begins by using the words of the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people..."

This is how Peter and the early church interpreted what had happened at Pentecost and so the missionary zeal began to share the news of Jesus, the Christ.

From this point we see the phenomenal growth of the church as people accepted the message, came to faith, were baptized and met regularly for worship and fellowship.

Where are we today in the continuing story of the Holy Spirit at work?

1. I believe that the Holy Spirit is still working in the lives of God's people. This is evidenced by the way people come to Christ, are convicted to work in a variety of areas often with the outcasts of society, share in worship, share their faith, encourage their children and grandchildren to be part of a community of faith.

All these things are a witness to Christ and evidence of the Holy Spirit.

2. However it is so easy in our society to let go of our faith because we have so much material wealth and security that some say 'why bother with faith'. However the Spirit convicts us to be firm in our faith, to live it out for Christ's sake and care for each other.

3. The Holy Spirit also convicts us when we are like a 'dry bag of bones' in our faith. The only rejuvenation comes through the power of the Spirit, seeking renewal and wanting, in our hearts, to be close to our God.

4. I believe we need to be prompted and reminded to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit so that we don't do things on our own and in our own strength but in the strength of God's Holy Spirit who strengthens and sustains us.

5. We are reminded that it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the joy in faith, that ability to celebrate our faith and go forward in hope.

It is encouragement for the now, hope for the future and strength to meet all faith challenges that we encounter that makes the Holy Spirit so important. Both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures teach us that.

So let us celebrate again Pentecost Sunday thanking God for the gift of the empowering Holy Spirit. Amen