

Today is Pentecost Sunday, 'the birthday of the Church'. Pentecost is a Greek word meaning '50', so we celebrate Pentecost 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. Forty days he taught and encouraged his followers, then after his Ascension they waited another ten days for his gift of the Holy Spirit.

In ancient Israel, Pentecost was the celebration of the wheat harvest, 50 days after the slaying of the Passover lamb. Since biblical times, the Jewish celebration ('Shavuot') also commemorates the day the Ten Commandments were revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The Holy Spirit is God in action. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is called 'the third person of the Trinity' as if he is a lesser Being than Father and Son. He has certainly been 'the neglected member of the Godhead'. (In the Apostles' Creed there are at least 10 statements about Jesus Christ and only one about the Holy Spirit).

At the beginning of time, God's Spirit (Hebrew 'ruach') created this universe out of nothing, brought order out of chaos. 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth' (Psalm 33:6). In last week's Time Magazine (May 13, 2002) there's a double page spread headed 'A Star Is Born': 'The astonishing images beaming down from the new high-resolution camera on the Hubble Space telescope arrived last week, and they are out of this world. This photo of a stellar nursery is a close-up of the Cone Nebula, a cloud of gas and dust some 2,500 light-years from Earth. From top to bottom, the celestial pillar spans 2.5 light years - 3,000 times the size of our solar system. Stars are being born within the cloud as dense knots of gas collapse and flare with nuclear fusion. Five billion years ago, when our sun was still a newborn, it was probably shrouded in a cloud like this one.' That's the creative Spirit of God at work.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures - our 'Old Testament' - there is the deep conviction that no one can do the work of God without the Spirit of God; no one can lead others for God who is not led by God's Spirit. The Spirit gives Joseph skill to rule (Genesis 41:38); he gives Joshua military prowess (Numbers 27:18); he gives skill to a couple of craftsmen (Exodus 31:2-6), and he gives words to the prophets.

The Holy Spirit empowers Jesus, from his conception, and throughout his ministry, to teach and to heal. And before Jesus ascended to the Father, he gave his followers a mandate designed to motivate them for the task ahead. He promised to send the Holy Spirit in his place (Luke 24:49).

Notice we used 'he' - the Holy Spirit is not an 'it' or a thing (although the Bible describes his operations as being like the wind, unpredictable or even mysterious). The English language used to say 'Holy Ghost', but the Spirit is not a 'spook' either. He is like Jesus, who is like God: he can think, will and feel - that is, he possesses all the attributes of any personality: intellect, emotion and will. He can be grieved and he can be quenched or stifled and ignored. The Holy Spirit 'inspires' people to say what God wants them to say (or to write those things down). So prophets and Scripture are 'inspired' by the Spirit. The Spirit guides us into the truth about Jesus, about ourselves and our sinfulness - and its consequence, judgment - and gives us the 'big picture' and God's will for the future (John 16:8-13).

When you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit enters your life, and he will never leave you. In a sense, he's a guest: you've let him in the front door. It's now an exciting (and sometimes scary) process letting him take control of every room in your home. (Perhaps you could imagine these rooms, invite him in, and talk about what he discovers there!). He helps us to pray (Romans 8:26), to communicate to others about Christ (Mark 13:11), to love (Galatians 5:22), and to do what is right (1 John 2:27).

So be 'filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18). You get drunk with wine by choosing the sort you want, imbibing it, and ingesting it. Then your behavior exhibits some changes according to how much and how often you drink (changing - and eventually controlling - you). So with the Spirit, says Paul. But in one sense you don't get more of the Spirit; he gets more of you.

How am I filled with the Holy Spirit? First you must desire him - hungering and thirsting for what is right (Matthew 5:6). This involves confession of your sins (1 John 1:9). Then ask him to fill you: if you ask for anything he wants, he'll hear you (1 John 5:14,15). Thank him for filling you, and by faith live moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day in his power and under his direction.

He wants to change you, though your basic temperament remains the same. Paul, for example, was a very aggressive person before his conversion but the Spirit redirected all that emotional energy towards more positive ends. Being 'filled with the Spirit' simply means being controlled by him.

Are you supposed to 'feel' anything when the Spirit comes into your life? Yes and no. Some do, some don't. Some have a 'peak experience' - for a few it's quite powerful. For others it's quite a matter-of-fact transaction. The Spirit operates uniquely in each of us. Remember, he's like the wind - sometimes a hurricane, sometimes a gentle breeze.

Indeed, Paul and Luke describe receiving the Spirit in different ways. For Paul 'receiving' the Spirit makes us God's children (Romans 8:15). For Luke 'receiving' the Spirit gives us power (Acts 1:8). However, Paul also writes about receiving the Spirit with accompanying miracles (Galatians 3:1-5). Christians today generally follow either Luke or Paul on this point - the Pentecostals like Luke, the evangelicals Paul. In the early church, 'Spirit' and 'Word' went hand in hand. Let us combine both Luke and Paul: allowing the Spirit to make us holy, give us wisdom and endue us with power. Throughout the world, where 'signs and wonders' accompany the proclamation of the good news the church is dynamic and alive. However the great need for those young churches is Bible teaching - but without losing their enthusiasm.

About miracles: some Christians expect a 'miracle a day'; others confine them to the pages of their Bibles! Jesus did promise that his followers would perform the same miracles he did - even greater ones (John 14:12). His power still the same. But note that biblical miracles clustered around just four historical periods - the creation, Moses and the Exodus, the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus and the apostolic era. There were always a few miracles at other times (eg. those in the Book of Daniel). Does God still heal miraculously? Certainly, and we should pray for that possibility. But today no one has a gift of healing like Jesus' or Paul's. No one can heal anyone at any time. Sometimes Paul healed everyone in a city. But no faith healer I've heard of has a gift like that today. Some of them build hospitals: if they had Paul's gift they might be emptying them!

Christians sometimes get nervous about spiritual gifts they don't fully understand, especially if they sense the Holy Spirit nudging them to be the channel of such a gift. It is important to remember that the Spirit doesn't offer white-elephant gifts. His presents are not useless, like the thing you took home from the last Christmas party. We are wise not to turn up our noses at his gifts, for he knows what he is doing. And the Church is waiting to benefit from our gift-offerings...

Stay open-minded. Don't fall for Cornford's Law, which says 'Nothing should ever be done for the first time.' Instead, opt for the perspective of Charles Schulz, creator of Peanuts: 'Life is like a ten-speed bicycle. Most of us have gears we never use.' If we could scan a congregation with God's radar, we would probably spot dozens of unused gifts - spiritual capacities lying dormant in the lives of many Christians. Meanwhile, the whole church is poorer.

Again, the Holy Spirit is simply God in action. God acting in your life individually, and in the life of the church. (Some years ago a preacher caused a fuss when said in one of our Australian Anglican Cathedrals: 'If the Holy Spirit were removed from this place, 99% of what we do here would go on unhindered!').

This morning I want to major on something Paul says about the Holy Spirit. Two years ago, my wife Jan and I did a SKI trip around Australia ('Spending the Kids' Inheritance!'). We listened on CD to all the Psalms as we drove down the beautiful Western Australian coast, and to all of Paul as we drove across the Nullabor. Sometime, if you're doing a long car-trip, listen to all of Paul's letters, and you'll be amazed at his fervor, his passion, his energy. This man was utterly 'sold out' to Christ.

TEXT: COLOSSIANS 1:24-29.

Paul's secret? It's here in Colossians 1: 24-29.

Christ - the Spirit - within, gives him 'energy'.

I have a shelf-full of books about the Holy Spirit and his gifts. I have one titled '27 Spiritual Gifts'. I don't know one where 'energy' is listed as a gift of the Spirit. That's a pity.

In this paragraph Paul talks about the special ministry given to him - to warn and teach, and reveal the truth about God-in-Christ, encouraging people towards their full potential/ maturity. He labors at this 'agonizingly', as the Greek word literally puts it, striving like an athlete: 'I labor diligently, I strive as in a race, I wrestle for victory, by the mighty energy of Christ working in me; and with great and effective power.'

At this point it is good to ask ourselves: how many prayers and tears, how much heartache and disappointment have people gone through for me to come to Christ? Think of the Bible in your hand: the blood of martyrs, the fears and tears of persecuted people throughout centuries, the sweat and labor of translators, and the effort of teachers to make it plain and clear all worked together to produce God's word in the Scriptures. People have died to make all this possible!

Paul 'rejoices in his sufferings' (an oxymoron if ever there was one!). In 1 Corinthians 11 he goes into some detail: 'Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.'

Talk about 'negative energy'!

RUNNING ON EMPTY?

A couple of days ago I talked to a woman who has been suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome for years. She told me she can only read for five minutes and is then exhausted. Yesterday I was on a spiritual retreat, and another woman there couldn't eat the onion soup - she's allergic to onions.

We moderns have invented all sorts of things to make our life easier, and they're having the opposite effect. There are chemicals in our foods, our water, the fabrics of clothes we wear and seats we sit on, pollutants in the air - toxic substances robbing us of energy. As they say to world travelers: 'In third world countries don't drink the water; in Western countries don't breathe the air!'

Lack of energy in general, or a decrease in the level of energy that you used to have, can be a sign that your body is not functioning as efficiently as it could. The reasons for this may be due to many factors. However, simply stated, it is usually due to deficiency of proper nutrients - proteins, vitamins, minerals, oxygen and enzymes; inefficiency of the digestive system, congestion of organs such as the liver and kidneys, and congestion of the lymph and colon systems of elimination. When toxic wastes are stored the cells become less efficient at producing energy. What energy is produced must be directed toward survival as a first priority. Less energy is available for muscle movement and activity. Fatigue is the means our body uses to block mind and body from continuing to deplete its life reserves. It is our body's way of letting us know that we are disregarding its needs. The body may be calling for rest, relaxation and exercise. If you are consuming a high-fat, high refined carbohydrate diet, watch out! Excessive alcohol or caffeine, drugs, tobacco, stress, and poor diet (not enough vegetables, vitamins and minerals) are all energy robbers. So cut back on fats, refined sugars, refined carbohydrates (white bread, flour products) and get plenty of servings of fruits and vegetables.

And we must also deal with negative emotions like worry, anxiety, fear, anger, hatred and guilt. Do that with a trusted friend or counselor.

Now, back to Paul and the secret of his 'energy'. Paul often talks about the Spirit's 'power' within us, and uses several Greek words - like ischus, kratos, dunamis and exousia, to describe how the Spirit works. But the Greek words energies or energeia refer to the outworking of all these energy sources. For example, in Ephesians 3: 20: 'Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power (dunamis) that energizes (energes) us.' For Paul, energy is produces something; it is the effective 'working out' of God's gifts of power. The Holy Spirit energizes the prayers we offer (Romans 8:26-27), and our service for the Lord (Romans 8:11). But the Spirit is not wild and untamed: the energy he releases in us and through us is controlled and effective. It's something like a dam: all that power is latent in the water behind the dam wall; but it must be released to turn the turbines, which produce electric power. Then wires conduct electricity. But if you put 1000 volts of electricity through the wires, they will burn. They may not be designed to carry 1000 volts. There will be a short circuit, or fire.

Physically, emotionally and spiritually, individuals have varying energy levels. Some are 'high energy' people (Paul, Augustine, Francis, Patrick, Luther, Wesley): you may not have these energy-reserves, and that's O.K.

But most of us know there are 'blockages' in our lives robbing us of the energy we could have if we were freed of these impediments. Is there hope for us? The good news of the gospel answers with a resounding 'Yes!'

When the Spirit's power invades a fisherman like Simon Peter or a shoe salesman like D L Moody, or a young American who's only done a couple of years in Bible colleges like Billy Graham they can be very effective servants of Christ indeed. 'Correct' doctrine, homiletically-sound sermons, professional techniques all have their place, but throughout the world the churches that are open to the Lord's power working among them are alive. Churches that have shunned this dimension for a rationalistic faith are declining everywhere.

Introducing his Letters to Young Churches J B Phillips states: 'The great difference between present-day Christianity and that in these letters, is that, to us, it is primarily a performance; to them it was a real experience. We reduce the Christian religion to a code... a rule of heart and life. To these it was quite plainly the invasion of their lives by a new quality of life altogether.'

WHAT CAN I DO?

First, we can determine to follow Christ's example of loving service to others. Some are called to 'greatness' (that is, they are called to do humble tasks, like working behind the scenes or washing others' feet!); others are on centre stage (dangerous for the spirituality of most people). When 'the world' talks about leadership you hear words like: Power, Influence, Leverage. Leaders, powerful people, 'make things happen', or 'don't put up with any nonsense'. Jesus talks of leaders with words like, Compassion, Humility, Gentleness, Generosity, Patience, Service.

Two stories:

== During the American Revolution, a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. Their leader was shouting instructions at them but making no other attempt to help them. Asked why by the rider, the leader said with great dignity, "Sir, I'm a corporal!" The stranger apologized, dismounted, and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. The job done, he turned to the corporal and said, "If you need some more help, son, call me." With that, the Commander-In-Chief, George Washington, remounted his horse and rode on.

== His name is John. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant. Kinda esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it. One day John decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so John starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now, people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. John gets closer and closer to the pulpit and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. (Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before!) By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward John. Now the deacon is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?"

It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The people are thinking, "The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do." And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to John and sits with him so he won't be alone.

Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget." Perhaps, however, God has put an idea in your mind or a 'groan' in your heart for some major missional activity. Let me quote from

arguably the best Methodist preacher in the English-speaking world in the first half of the last century: 'All true progress in this world is by the echo of the groan of God in the hearts of men and women. How were the slaves freed in the British Empire? Did all England wake up one morning and say: "This is wrong. We must free the slaves"? No! One man woke up one morning with the groan of God in his soul, and William Wilberforce and his friends labored until that most splendid hour in our history, when Britain was worthy of herself, and, under no pressure from anybody but the pressure of her own conscience, paid a larger sum than her national debt to free the slaves.'

'How was all the social trouble after the Industrial Revolution ameliorated? God groaned in the heart of Lord Shaftesbury, and he toiled and toiled to serve and save the poor. How were the prisons cleaned up in England? Did everybody suddenly say, "These prisons are places of indescribable filth"? No! God groaned in the hearts of John Howard (! - my exclamation point) and Elizabeth Fry. How were the orphans rescued from the streets of London? A century ago (as recently as that!) God groaned in the heart of Thomas Barnardo. Progress is by the echo of the groan of God in the hearts of men and women. And you need never despair for our wayward race while "the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered". (Westminster Sermons, Volume one, page 84).

CONCLUSION

Tom Rees, in his very good little book on the Holy Spirit ('The Spirit of Life, or Life More Abundant') says 'I don't like big cities; I much prefer the countryside, and for this reason I go to London only when it is absolutely necessary. However, every week or so I set out for London in the car, complete with a list of the people I must see and the articles that I must purchase. Not long ago I set out for one of my journeys to Town. After parking the car I went into a shop to make several purchases. "I want six of those, and a dozen of those; oh yes, and one of those too." While the assistant was packing my parcel I put my hand in my pocket to pull out my wallet, and to my horror it wasn't there. Covered with confusion, I said: "I'm so sorry, I shall have to ask you to put those things back - I've come to London without any money. I will call in again in a day or so." And then, covered with embarrassment, and feeling very small, I walked out of the shop, and as I looked through my shopping list again I discovered that without my money I could do nothing - I could purchase nothing. My journey had been completely fruitless; so with a heavy heart, I climbed back into the car and drove home.'

'I went straight to my room to collect the wallet from the suit I had worn the previous day, and then panic seized me - it wasn't there, and I knew that it contained nearly twenty pounds. There was only one thing for it - I must have been robbed. Then, in a sort of desperate way, I ran my hands over the jacket I was wearing. Can you imagine how I felt when I discovered my wallet in the jacket pocket - it had been there all day. I had taken it with me to London. I had carried it with me into the shop! I had brought it home again.'

'Now, why was my journey to London fruitless? Why did I behave as if I were penniless? It was not because I did not have any money - I had nearly twenty pounds. No, the reason was simply this - I didn't know I had it.'

'Paul was indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And you too, my Christian friend, believe it or not, are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. All the resources that Paul had you have. Did I hear you say: "Then, if that is true, why is there such a difference between the life Paul lived and the life I live? Why was he so like the Master, and why am I so un-Christlike? Why was Paul so powerful where I am utterly weak and defeated?" The answer to your question is this: Paul appreciated very fully his resources in the Holy

Spirit. The fact that his body was the dwelling place of the Spirit dominated his life, and what is more, he learned by faith to draw on his resources.' (H & S., 1961, pp. 127-128).

So here's a special word from Paul to you who lack energy: The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you: he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit who dwells in you! (Romans 8:11). Again: the same power - which raised Jesus Christ from the dead - is available to you and me today to help us with day-to-day living! 'I am crucified with Christ, but I live; yet not I but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in this body I live by the faith of the Son of God.' (Galatians 2:20). 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ' (Ephesians 1:3).

So where do we start? First, live one day at a time, as Jesus suggested. 'Today is unique! It has never occurred before and it will never be repeated. At midnight it will end, quietly, suddenly, totally. Forever. But the hours between now and then are opportunities with eternal possibilities. Times may be hard and people may be demanding, but never forget that life is special. Every single day is a special day. God is at work in you!' (Charles R. Swindoll)

Then remember, 'The greatness of a person's power is in the measure of their surrender to the Holy Spirit.' Hear this - again from Paul (2 Corinthians 5:17): 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'. Psalm 27: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?' (Psalm 27:1). And as Paul said to the timid Timothy: 'God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.' (2 Timothy 1:7).

Every time we say, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit,' we mean that we believe that there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it. (J. B. Phillips, Plain Christianity [1954]).

As we go now to our daily tasks and activities, may we be assured that the Holy Spirit energizes our life with his presence and his power according to our particular needs.

DISCUSS:

In Colossians 1:24 Paul insists that he rejoices in his sufferings for the church. Does this suggest an unhealthy masochism on Paul's part? Does it matter that these sufferings are not just any afflictions, but those which, like the Cross, are endured for the sake of others? Under what circumstances can you rejoice in your sufferings? (As someone complained to me this week: 'If God wants human beings to hear and build their lives on the Word of God, why doesn't He make it easier?').

Talk about health and stress. Humans of course vary greatly in terms of their productivity under stress. As stress increases, some are super effective; others are incapacitated. Do you 'fall apart' or 'get going?' What can make the difference?

People receive the Holy Spirit, in Luke's meaning of the term, in different ways. Some people receive the Spirit more or less spontaneously, while for others the response is quite conscious and deliberate; some experience dramatic manifestations of the Spirit, while with others the manifestations are more subdued. The way in which people receive the Spirit will be determined, to some extent, by the situation and by the person (his or her personality type, age, station in life, church environment). More important than the particular way we receive the Spirit, however, is what we do after having received. It's like the difference between a big church wedding and a small family wedding. The kind of wedding you have doesn't

determine the kind of marriage you'll have. What's important is how you live out the reality of married life. (Larry Christenson, 'Receiving the Holy Spirit' in LaVonne Neff et al (eds), *Practical Christianity*, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1988, p. 164.). Do you agree?

Study Paul's prayers for the Ephesians (1:15-23, 3:14-21). Do we pray for one another like this? What might happen if we did?

'Paul says he suffered devastating attacks from within the church. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Caesar is killed by a group of assailants. A famous line is 'et tu, Brutè?' Caesar was stunned that one he thought was a friend would turn on him. Anyone who has served in the church for any length of time understands this feeling. Some of the most painful blows come from the ones we thought were our friends. It would be nice if everyone in the church applied God's commands to love, kindness and encouragement. It would be nice, but it is not the way it is.' It might be helpful to talk about that.

Why not pray for one another for the Holy Spirit to 'control' or 'fill' each person in your group?

Rowland Croucher May 2002