

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

SPIRIT OF COMFORT AND TRUTH

When we think about it from our human perspective, it really doesn't seem like a great plan. It probably wouldn't pass any modern forms of risk management or project analysis, and you would certainly be hard up getting any bank or other financial institution to lend money to this venture based on its operational plan. On paper, it just doesn't seem feasible. I mean the bloke who has been placed in charge of the ongoing operation has a history of questioning the architect of the whole project, and has been known to state publicly that he doesn't even know Him. The others aren't any better; one wants to see solid results before he commits himself in any way, and the rest show a real reluctance to get in and do the tough stuff, in fact preferring to run off and lock themselves away. It just doesn't seem like a very well thought out plan.

Perhaps it is not only us humans who might think like this about God's plan to grow His Church throughout the world using the disciples Jesus left behind. A man called Erasmus, a contemporary of Martin Luther in the Reformation, once told a class he was teaching his version of what happened after Jesus had ascended back into heaven. In the story, after Jesus has gone back up to heaven in glory, the angels all gathered around Him to learn what had happened during His years on earth. Jesus told them all about the miracles, His teachings, His death on the cross, His resurrection, etc. When He had finished His story, Michael the archangel asked Jesus, "But Lord, what happens now?" Jesus answered, 'I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed me. They will tell everyone my message and express my love. These faithful people will build my Church'. 'But', Michael replies, 'What's your other plan?' To which Jesus replies, 'I have no other plan. That's it! My Church will grow through those people and my work through them'.

From our human perspective, perhaps even from the angels' perspective, it doesn't seem very feasible or realistic that the Church, the Christian fellowship of all those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God and their Saviour, that the Church would grow through those imperfect first followers Jesus left to

continue His work on earth. And yet, here we are, 2,000 years later, on the other side of the world, worshipping God, believing that news, and continuing that work. Why is this so? Well, it's partly because, as happens many other times in the Bible, God chooses people to carry out His work who to us seem imperfect and incapable but in whom He sees strength and potential when He works through them; think of young Mary, shepherd boy David, Moses the stutterer, and many others.

But even more importantly, it's because what is missing from our human evaluation and judgment is the fact that these people are not left alone, but are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth and comfort. Just what that means to them in their lives and in their work is shown in the transformation we see in them in the Pentecost account in Acts 2. After Jesus dies on the cross, rises again, and even during His 40 days with them and the 10 days after He goes back to heaven, the disciples and the other followers are scared and lock themselves away. They had seen how the authorities persecuted Jesus, and they didn't want to suffer the same fate. But when the Holy Spirit came to them at Pentecost, as Jesus promised, in a very dramatic way with a wind and flames of fire, what a transformation! They go from hiding away to boldly proclaiming their faith. The hostility and persecution towards Jesus and His message was still there for them; they all suffered in some way for the message they were sharing, and most of them ended up dying for it. But, as Jesus says in our reading here, they were filled with the Spirit of truth and comfort, telling the world God's message of both judgment and forgiveness, and being guided and strengthened in the work they are now called to do. For them, the transforming power of the Spirit meant God could now use them to carry out His plan in a way we would not have thought was possible.

To receive the Holy Spirit, the third person of our Triune God, is something which transforms our lives. In the Bible we are told that to both first receive our faith and then continue to grow in that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, something Martin Luther picks up in explaining the third article of the Apostles' Creed. It is a gift we can truly thank God for, because, simply, without it we wouldn't be thanking God. And we need the truth and comfort, the strength and the guidance, which comes from this gift just as much as did those who received the Spirit 2,000 years ago on the day of Pentecost. While today many Christians in our world, sadly, still do suffer hardship and persecution because of their faith, thankfully we here in Australia don't. But we can still at times face ridicule, scorn, mocking, because of our faith. Many in our

society have very set ideas about what we as Christians are in favour of, and particularly against, so to be open about our faith can bring ridicule or attack in some way. There are commentators I don't read or listen to, and panel type shows I don't watch, because I find the way they refer to Christian beliefs and values to be at times inaccurate, and always offensive. In a society which likes to promote diversity and the views and values of all being respected, it can sometimes feel like that doesn't include us as Christians.

And even among our friends and family what can we face? There can be assumptions once people know we are Christian and go to church that we are against drinking alcohol, we'd never say a word we wouldn't say in front of our kids, that most things the majority think are fun are off the table for us, so that if we do, or speak about doing, any of these things we can get the response, 'but you're a Christian!' (isn't that frustrating?!?) And while it is hard for us to go through that, and in some settings it can make us reluctant to speak about or refer to our faith, it also makes it harder for us to share with people why we have the faith we do, why it is important to us, and how it really does enrich our lives and make them better.

So, while we don't face that persecution of jail and even death that the early Christians faced because of their faith, and which sadly some in our world still face today, we can still face opposition and scorn at least in some settings which can make it difficult to be open about and to share our faith. We, like those we learn about who were transformed on the first day of Pentecost, need the transforming power the Holy Spirit in our lives, and thank God we have that. The Holy Spirit comes to us and is with us now to give us God's message of forgiveness. In speaking to us through God's Word, the Bible, the Spirit shows us that we are all guilty of turning away from God, but that through Jesus we receive forgiveness for our sins. And then it is also the work of the Spirit, just like we saw with that first unlikely bunch of Kingdom workers, the first disciples, to lead us to use the gifts God has given us and the situations we find ourselves in during our daily lives to show and share God's love with others. It's not always easy, we know, sometimes its very hard. But there is also that comfort and strength in knowing that we don't do this alone but with God through the Holy Spirit being with us always.

Sometimes though, we might think that to have that confidence to face the world, or even our family, friends, and workmates, in talking about our faith would be a whole lot easier if we had also been through the experience of hearing a gushing wind, having flames of fire on our head and the heads of those around

us, and all of a sudden being able to speak languages from other parts of the world like Chinese, Greek, Russian. What we see in accounts like the book of Acts about those early believers shows that they still had their doubts and their struggles, their conflicts with one another. Our human sinfulness and struggles are still there even when we get the big signs.

We do have great signs and means of the Holy Spirit coming to our lives and the lives of others, we probably just too often take them for granted. Again, God's Word is a way the Spirit speaks God's message of love and forgiveness, as well as His guidance and call, into our lives. Through our baptism, even though many of us can't remember our own baptism, through the promises and commitment God made to us there the Holy Spirit works throughout our lives, reminding us that nothing can separate us from God's love for us. And every time we come to receive Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion, the Spirit speaks the words of comfort and truth to us as we hear, 'given for you', 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sins'. In these things we find our assurance and our strength. The big and the flashy aren't all they are cracked up to be, as in many things, but it is in the real and down to earth Means of God's Grace that we receive in our everyday lives, that we also receive the very real gift of faith and of all that now brings to us.

As a plan, maybe the way Jesus left the Church to go and grow doesn't make much sense to us, but it certainly worked. That's because, as with all His work it doesn't rely on us, but on His Holy Spirit working in and through us. On this day of Pentecost we thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and how faith in Him and all He has to offer continues to grow in our world. We also pray that we each continue to be open to the Spirit's work in our lives, to worship Him, read and hear His word, remember our Baptism, regularly receive Holy Communion, so that we also can continue to grow in our faith and be a part of going out to share and grow His kingdom. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Are there times/situations/settings when you find it hard to speak about and share your faith? Why is that? Pray for God to help you to find ways to still be a witness to Him in those circumstances.
- Are there times when you particularly feel the Holy Spirit's presence with you in your life? Are there times when you wish you felt it more? Consider how you can more regularly connect to the Means of Grace; God's Word, Baptism, and Holy Communion, so that you can know and grow in His love each day.

Pray: thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit to us. Pray that we stay in our faith and grow and share that faith each day.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
19.05.24*