

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Spiritual Life

Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 12th June 2011

Psalm 104:24-35

Acts 2:1-21

One of our favourite places to go, when we can, is to the Highland Wildlife Park. We all have our different favourite animals there: the tigers, the red pandas, the wildcats, the monkeys, and the polar bear. There is such variety in the different forms of life which inhabit our planet. There is enormous variety in creation and God is behind it all. That is what the Psalm we read says. But while this is true, the Psalm says more than that.

When you read this Psalm, whether you begin at the beginning or in the middle as we did today, as well as getting a wide picture of creation given you, there is something else which comes through strongly: the continuing care of God. The Psalmist does not have a vision of God creating the world and then setting it spinning on its axis and leaving it to take care of itself. Far from it. He shows that all creation looks to God, for food, for the climatic conditions that promote the various forms of life, and for life itself. Creation does this, and we do it too.

Today is Pentecost, when we remember the giving of the Holy Spirit in power to the first disciples, to enable them to carry out the mission of witness which Jesus had given them. Our Psalm reminds us that although this was and is one important function of God's Holy Spirit, it was not then that the Spirit came into being, or came into the world. God's Spirit has been in the world, caring for the world since the dawn of creation itself.

In some ways, although this is a very ancient hymn, it is also a massive protest against what we call modernity, the idea that we can live life on our own terms, that we are autonomous, that if we just learn more and invent more we will be able to solve all our problems and find a perfect life. Not so, says our psalmist. Creation looks to God to open his hand and feed them, to breathe his life, his spirit and give them life, and when he does not, they die. And we too do not choose the time of our birth and we too have no say over the time of our death, and we too should remember that we are dependant on God for life and all that we need to make life possible.

For some this is a very depressing thought. Independence is something we are taught to value, and autonomy, achieving more by striving harder, has been foundational to our society for at least the last three hundred years. It's a given. And of course there is truth in that idea. There are many things that we can do to affect our own lives.

At this time of year, there is a game which I like to play in the primary schools, with the primary 7 children, who are thinking ahead to the next stage of their lives. We will be doing it in Gergask tomorrow and in Newtonmore next week. I line up three or four children at one side of the room, and then take these handwritten cards, which are randomly shuffled. To make things even more random, and give the children a measure of uninformed choice, they take turns to choose a number from 1 to 3, and then I thumb over that number and take the card indicated and read it out. It might say "you are born", or "you become a grandparent" or "you fail you exams" or "you pass your exams" or "you get a job" or "you fall in love and are loved back" or so on. More than one card in the pack says "You die". Depending on whether the event indicated is considered positive or negative the children are told to take one, two or three steps forward - or backwards. They think that they are trying to get across the room, and sometimes one does do that. But really it is vehicle for discussing the various things that may happen in a life and getting them to work out if there is

anything they can do to achieve or prevent an outcome, or if the happening is a matter of chance. If they die they sit down.

It is good for the children to know that they can make choices that affect themselves and others, and it is right that they should be aware that things will happen to them that they didn't plan, because of the choices of others, and so on. And at the end we talk about everything being within God's plan and loving hand.

There is a word that is often used these days when people want to say that they are not 'Religious' but..... they say that they are "Spiritual". I often hear it when discussing funerals. "He wasn't really Religious, but he was a Spiritual man." I really and truly don't know what people mean by this, and I suspect that everyone means something different. I think it is maybe used as a way to express the hope and suspicion that we are more, and mean more than a concatenation of atoms or a mere animal, without having to put this in more definite terms. But what Psalm 104 tells us is that indeed we are spiritual, all of us, and in a very definite way. All people and all life is spiritual, because it is by the Spirit, the breath of God, that we exist, and without God we simply have no being as well as no meaning. God's Spirit is what give and keeps everyone in life, what keeps the earth spinning on its axis and what holds that further flung parts of the galaxy doing whatever it does. If there is life on some other distant planet, God's Spirit will be what gives and maintains that life as well.

So then, what was so special about the day of Pentecost? If God's Holy Spirit has been in the world sustaining all life since the beginning, why is Pentecost remembered as the start of something?

In the way that Luke tells the story of that day, it is clear that on that occasion something was different. What happened on that particular day of Pentecost, day of the festival of Shavuot, which was a harvest festival fifty days after Passover, was beyond description. Luke says things were "as" and "like", seeking after analogies for something which was really like nothing else at all. It was a sound "like" a wind blowing. Tongues "as of" fire rested on them. But the effect was definite. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and went out in witness.

They knew that this was the Holy Spirit, because of what it was like. It was like wind: and wind, breath is used of God's Spirit from Genesis chapter one onwards. So the sound was a clue as to what was happening. It was like fire, and fire reminded them of God's Spirit being present in the burning bush when Moses met with God and got his instructions to go and be an agent of redemption for this people. It was a babel of languages, like the noise in the story of the tower of Babel, which meant that people were divided from each other. But now people were to be united, because language was not to stop people hearing the good news of Jesus.

They disciples knew that it was the Holy Spirit, because now they knew, with their own knowledge, not just with understanding of the head but with the conviction of the heart, that Jesus was still with them, that he would never leave them, that his ascension had been just the first stage in his being always and everywhere with his witnesses.

The pre-Christian Pentecost was a celebration of the grain harvest: the Christian Pentecost is a celebration of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The pre-Christian Pentecost celebrated God's Covenant with Israel and Israel's nationhood: the Christian Pentecost is a celebration of God's New Covenant and the Church as the new Israel.

The Holy Spirit came to the disciples in a new way, giving them not only breath and bodily life - as God gives us all - but giving them God's breath, God's life within them. And so they knew a change: what was just as remarkable as the speaking in other languages was that the disciples lost their fear. Having courage and boldness is a wonderful gift which God's Spirit gives his people. They lost their fear and they went out to fulfil one of the things that Jesus had told them which they

must have sincerely doubted. Jesus had promised that those who believed in him would do the works he did and even greater works than this (John 14:12). Here is the first manifestation of that. Here, on the day of Pentecost, is made physical, made audible, the indication of the new global nature of the gospel: something greater than they had seen even with Jesus.

After all, we never hear of Jesus speaking in different languages. The Holy Spirit in him did not give him that gift, because he did not need it. He told his disciples that he was sent only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel", but they were to be sent to all nations. They needed a gift that he did not. They were to do greater things, in a more wide-spread way.

And that is why we celebrate and mark Pentecost as one of the great feasts of the church. Because that is when things went global. It is when God's Spirit showed that God would help his children to bear fruit, to live with the courage needed to bear witness in the world. And he still does. That day the disciples needed to be able to speak to people from all the known world, so they were given the languages. We don't know if they kept that gift or if it was just for that day: we are not told.

Today we may need different gifts. We almost certainly still need the gift of courage, and boldness. We may need the gift of self-denial. We may need the gift of compassion. We may need the gift of communicating with people who have different ideas and outlooks from ours. God will give us the gifts we need at the times we need them, and when he does, we will know that Christ is at work in us, reaching out to gather in his harvest.

God gave his Spirit that day to all the disciples, not just to Peter and James and John, who had often seemed to be a sort of inner circle. In fact, it may be that Peter was not gifted with any other language that day, but instead his gift was that of boldness in speaking to the main crowd (which would be in the local Aramaic). All the disciples had things to do that day, even if Peter was to get the main focus of attention, so all were given the ability to do what God had for them. That is still the way God works today: through all his children, not just a special few.

All the people heard that day as well, and many believed. But not all reacted in the same way. Some speculated about the disciples' sobriety or sanity! And that will still be true today as well. After all the message which we have to give to people is that we can not live just as we please, we are not in charge of our own destiny. We are the beloved creation of a loving creator whose Spirit gives us and holds us in life. We are the beloved children of a heavenly Father who sent his only begotten Son to die to save us and rise from death to bring us hope of and for life.

God's Spirit is in you. God grant that daily we allow his Spirit to give us power and grace, courage and humility to be his witnesses so that others may hear in ways that they can understand and come to know themselves, not just as vaguely "spiritual", but as beloved children of God.

Amen.