

Sermon on the Spirit Blowin' in the Wind

What a good week to be thinking about Pentecost and the blowing of the Holy Spirit over those early disciples in Jerusalem?!

The answer my friends is blowin' in the wind, as the song says.

As I was sitting down in my office to think about this sermon the wind was blowing up and down Bendooley street like a freight train with its brakes off, the trees were swaying, the leaves were skipping.

It's no wonder the coming of the Spirit is pictured as like the rush of a violent wind because it certainly changes your perspective.

Suddenly you have to brace yourself against the force of the breeze or it will knock you off your feet.

The brisk, cool air chafes your skin as it brushes past.

Your throat becomes dry and speaking becomes hard and you start to notice every inhaling and exhaling breath you take.

Tom and I left for school on Thursday morning only to find half the rubbish bins in the street knocked over by nothing other than the power of the wind.

We picked up our neighbour's only to see it knocked over again as we drove away.

On our property in SA not far from the sea, the trees are bent at right angles as the wind has come whistling off the ocean for years and years.

You have to live as a different person in that kind of wind, it makes you reconsider your assumptions about everything – how you move, what you wear, where you go.

It stirs you up.

And to invoke a well known biblical phrase, the wind blows where it will.

We have no control.

Now I wonder whether faith has ever felt like that to you?

Like the effect of a powerful wind blowing across your existence?

Like the love of God has scorched across your life and re-oriented everything?

I wonder has worship ever felt that way?

We invoke the Holy Spirit every week in different ways after all?

Do we feel the fire?

Are we cleansed and renewed and sent out to be fearless followers of Jesus in the world?

I remember watching a clip of Shirley Caesar singing, 'Peace in the Midst of the Storm', and the whole church is heaving and moving and dancing all as one.

Oh to have been there and experienced it first hand.

It's certainly true that the Bible shows us many times when the Spirit works quietly and gently, we might take our Gospel reading today as one example.

Yet we do well to remember this is the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation.

The same Spirit that bound back together the dry bones of exiled Israel.

The same Spirit that appeared as like tongues of fire as the little band of disciples huddled together in Jerusalem.

The same spirit that turned the well intentioned but bumbling Peter into a world beater – 3000 added to their number that very day.

The Spirit does not work quietly and gently all the time.

It is like the sound of a rushing and violent wind, the power that allows the disciples to offer forgiveness in Jesus' name, and that which draws people into faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

And through the faith of ordinary people like you and me, God blows through the church today to put us on the front line of the world's need.

It shakes us into realising that belonging to Christ means a life of holy risk, rather than self protection; of taking the dangerous path of the Gospel.

Pentecost is a bursting open of the power of God in our lives and faith, and throughout the world.

The institutional church has often been wary of charismatic renewals.

It all seems a little out there, a little much, a little too wild and unpredictable.

It has been nervous of what seems a hugely subjective, experiential brand of faith.

Part of the reserve is reasonable, Spirit language and expression can be as open to manipulation as anything.

I'm always suspicious of the often cited claim, 'God has put this on my heart.', it can be a way of saying, I want it my way and if you disagree you're opposing the work of God.

But part of it is an unwarranted fear.

An unwillingness to accept that where the Spirit is there's freedom, as Paul memorably puts it.

A concern for maintaining power structures and processes and authorities and order.

The institutional church can think itself superior to the kind of unordered expressionism of charismatics.

But over and over again it has been confounded by the rising up of churches in some of the most unexpected places.

In Africa, and especially in South America, among other places, charismatic renewals have emerged and shaken up the Christian landscape, and opened people up to the love of God in Jesus in new and invigorating ways.

We can't control or anticipate where the Spirit will blow.

God's order, as it turns out, is more often dis-orderly to our way of thinking.

All we can do is be open to its power to transform us and the world.

The coming of the Spirit is about what God is doing.

Jesus has ascended, but, as always, just as he promised, we are not left alone.

The mutual love of the Father and the Son holds together in the Spirit.

God is totally contained in Godself, a perfect triune relationality in love.

God doesn't need us to be God.

Yet the Spirit is with us, poured out upon us, such is God's gracious self giving.

Pure gift, pure self offering in freedom.

So what we have is the work of the Father and the Son, through the Spirit, continuing to be exacted in the world.

The ongoing ministry of Christ through the Spirit.

Barbara Brown-Taylor calls Acts the ‘Gospel of the Spirit’ as it is the record of how the church was blown into being and started to breathe as the Spirit moved.

Both of the great creeds of the faith affirm *credo in Spiritum sanctum*, I believe in the Holy Spirit.

This doesn’t mean ‘I believe’ like we might say about the tooth fairy or UFOs, it means ‘I trust’.

I give myself over to the Spirit of God working in my life.

The Spirit has often been a neglected partner in theology, in more recent times a renewed interest has brought it back more into the fore of the church’s faith and understanding.

This is a good thing.

For it is the Spirit who conveys the peace of God to us and her fruit is grown as we express love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control in our lives together.

We shared yesterday at the Men’s Breakfast with a couple of men who have been refugees from Burundi.

Protais & Deo.

Deo’s full name is Deo Gratias, which translates literally, thanks be to God.

These are men who have experienced more heartbreak and struggle in their lives than most of us can imagine or ever will.

Civil war, famine, poverty, the separation from family, neighbours and friends turning on them because they were of a different tribe.

The kind of disadvantage I’ll never know.

One day Protais walked into Campbelltown UCA and started worshipping with them.

And through that relationship, as they got to know each other, as they listened to each other and learnt to love each other, the church was able to start working with him.

Not that long ago, Protais became an Australian citizen.

He works two jobs and is trained as a medical technician.

Then he helped the church work with his brother Deo who arrived in Australia as a refugee only 3 months ago.

Their common faith has bound them together and through the work of the Spirit both the church and their Burundian friends have grown in their faith.

It all began because the church was there worshipping, witnessing, and Protais walked through the door one day to start worshipping with them.

That's it.

The Spirit bringing God's people together.

It hasn't all been easy.

There have been setbacks and disappointments, but new life as broken through and a new relationship has started to breathe.

God moves and calls and loves and blows through the world.

And even though things can seem small, hope is born into people's lives.

And incrementally God's kingdom grows.

The New Testament word for Spirit, pneuma, like the Hebrew word ruach, pertains literally to air and breath.

And given that it is the air that keeps us alive from the moment of birth, the theological connotations are expansive.

The spirit of God is the breath that keeps our faith alive.

God breathes within us so as to give us life and help us to persist in faith.

The thing about the Spirit is that even when our natural breath runs out, God continues to breathe through us.

Continues to give us life.

Jesus had died, been raised from the dead, and is now ascended, but the church would now breathe love through God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus.

And all the NT writers affirm that there is heavenly life beyond this earthly one, where the veil is lifted, and we see God face to face.

We move from living by faith to living by sight, and all those who remain on earth take strength as God holds the saints of the ages together before us.

As Peter stands up to preach on that first Pentecost day it is in the power of the Spirit.

And as in those earliest times the church fearlessly goes out to proclaim its risen Lord, it is in the power of the Spirit.

And as we continue to abide in Christ, and he in us today, the church in this place, it is in the power of the Spirit.

The Spirit is how our faith breathes.

It's what draws us to prayer, to worship, to loving kindness, to mission.

It's what shakes us out of our easy complacencies, and re-molds us as followers of Jesus.

It's what draws close when we are sorrowful, and it's what puts the song of the Lord in our voices as we sing his praise.

The Answer is indeed blowin' in the wind, God's holy wind of love.

So next time you stand in a gale feel the pinch on your cheek, the brush of cold on your face, and think of the Spirit of God blowing through your life. And be thankful.

There's an old song, one I'm sure will be familiar to most of you.

May the Lord our God put his spirit in our hearts as we sing, 'Breathe on me Breath of God'.