

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
Day of Pentecost (C)
Sunday, June 9, 2019

Acts 2:1-21 | Psalm 104: 25-35, 37
Romans 8:14-17 | John 14:8-17, 25-27

Today we are first and foremost reflecting on the Holy Spirit but let's look at the general idea before looking at the main event.

Now the word "Spirit" has a mixed meaning for our world today. On the one hand there are the spooks, ghouls, and ghosts of popular horror writing and films. In these, the language of possession and the presence of spirits are trivialized and reduced to green gunge in films like the Ghost Busters. All harmless and entertaining stuff that it is, it removes the whole idea of the spiritual into the realms of children's fantasy.

On the other hand, you have the church speaking carefully about the human spirit and God's Spirit and, yes, about the other spirits that seem to arise in human beings and drive them in different ways. Sadly, some Christians do not speak about these things carefully and end up sounding like people who believe in Ghost Busters rather than people who have something really important to say about humanity and the world. As a professor of Systematic Theology of mine once said, "You can always tell when Christians don't know what they are talking about because they start talking about the Holy Spirit!"

You see, I think most people understand, if not accept, the Christian idea of the soul. It's an idea that was, in one form or another, around for a long time before Christ came, namely that there is a fourth dimension to the world. As individuals, we understand ourselves as physical creatures but also as more than that. At the most profound level we see ourselves as beings whose essence, the real you and the real me, is in fact behind the physical bodies we are, behind the masks we present to the world, behind words we say, behind even the thoughts we speak in the silence of our minds. Ultimately, we are spirit. We are a soul.

And the fact that people, even in our acutely materialistic and secular world, do understand and relate to this basic truth, even if they are not sure if they believe it, is shown in the fact that the word "spirit" is still used so much. We frequently hear it don't we? "The triumph of the human spirit," "team spirit," "esprit de corps," "kindred spirit," "soul mate," "free spirit," "body, mind, and spirit," and so on.

I think most people would also understand us when we talk about spiritually sick and damaged people. Many human conditions – depression, grief, bitterness and rage, maliciousness, meanness, and selfishness, are to do with something deeper than the physical or even the mental. We have all known people who have become filled with these things haven't we? I can think of many.

One woman I knew, for example, was a member of a congregation I served in. She was a poor soul no doubt, and I think life had been pretty hard on her in some ways, but, for whatever reason, she had become full of malice and meanness. This was directed at all sorts of people. Though of very modest means herself (and perhaps partly why), she had absolutely no time for the down and outs and alcoholics that hung around the church most weeks. Worse though, I remember her meanness toward a

particular lad who came to church. He was in his 20's, clearly quite mentally challenged, and he lived at home with his mum. Yet, he was able to get on and do most things, and people made allowances for him. He could be a bit wearing, and a bit calculating actually, but he was a good lad who had drawn a pretty short straw in life, and he found a home in our church. Well this woman would not make any allowances for him at all. Any opportunity and she would be sniping at him or his mother. Well, you know the kind of thing. She was possessed by bitterness.

The word possession immediately summons up extreme and not very convincing scenarios from horror movies – where, usually perfectly decent and ordinary people are suddenly taken over by the devil or some evil and turned into monsters. Well that's not the way it works as far as most human evil is concerned. It is sadly true that there are some poor souls who have a mental illness that they have no power to resist but for most of us, that doesn't happen; evil cannot take us over randomly and against our will. It can only have power over us if we embrace and welcome it, and then – well we all know people can be driven by things, and they can lose their ability to resist what drives them. They surrender their freedom and become slaves to whatever they have fallen into, and are possessed in the true sense of the word.

We might think of alcoholics and drug addicts as obvious examples, and, even though their addictions are actually physical dependencies and not spiritual, there is still both the spiritual journey and the choices that lead them there. For most people, the only way back involves a real work of spiritual as well as chemical liberation. But such things are far more common in less dramatic forms – habits of mind and life, angers and resentments and hurts that fester and grow in us and sour our relationships with people and the world around us. The opposite can also be true. There are the good habits of mind and life. Kindness and love can grow and blossom in us, and, if we have met some unhappy and malevolent people, I am sure we can all also think of people we have met who radiate a positive goodness and kindness wherever they are.

Today as we celebrate the coming of God's Holy Spirit, I think we need to understand two really important things. First of all, we are all, more or less, Holy Spirits ourselves. For the spirit that is in you and me is the life that God has put there. As Saint John calls it in the Christmas gospel "the true light that enlightens every man – every human being." That light, that spirit, comes from God. It is created and given by God. No one else, even God, can possess it unless we discard or surrender it ourselves.

It was William Henley, the 19th Century poet who suffered terribly as a child from tuberculosis of the bone and who later lost his only daughter at the age of five, who wrote the now famous poem "Invictus," which translates as "undefeated" or "unconquered."

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

God does not want us to be slaves. Not to anger or malice. Not to bitterness or rage, but also not to Him. Sometimes Christians seem to be saying that we should be possessed by God, especially when they are talking about the Holy Spirit, that we should cease to be ourselves and become his puppet. But if God had wanted that he could have made a world of puppets. That would have been much easier.

No, William Henley's cry is a sad one, because it is a lonely cry of defiance and courage in the darkness. But it is right. I am indeed the captain of my soul because God made me so. Yes, we can be filled with the Holy Spirit, just as the disciples were at Pentecost. Just as we can surrender ourselves in love to one another in marriage or in some special shared experience. Just as we can be drenched in God's presence and love as we commune with Him in our prayers or here at this altar. But these are meetings of the spirit, where two spirits touch and commune, and that can only happen where both are truly themselves. It is an irony perhaps that we can only be one with God and other people if we are first truly ourselves, truly separate and distinct. Unity is only possible with two or more.

Secondly, and most importantly, we need to open our inmost selves to the fact that God's spirit is just as real as ours! Just as we can be influenced and led and take comfort and pleasure in all the various spiritual atmospheres that are around us – some evil, some good – so we can open our hearts and minds and souls to God's Spirit, not as slaves seeking to be possessed, but as sons and daughters of the High King of the universe, seeking the Father's love and finding honour and joy and adventure and pride in the High King's service. And so, let me finish with a prayer by Father Ljubo Kurtovic from Medugorje in Bosnia where I served as chaplain back in 1995.

"Come, Holy Spirit, come in our cities, in our homes, in our families, in our glances, in our hearts. Without you, we read books and do not become wise. Without you, we talk a lot but don't get any closer to one another. Without you, reality consists in dry events, facts, and numbers. Without you, our life falls apart into a succession of meaningless days. Without you, there is no faithfulness. Without you, our thoughts become ramblings. Without you, technology destroys us. Without you, churches become museums. Without you, prayer is just babbling. Without you, our smile becomes fixed and false. Without you, our world and our lives become a desert. Come, Holy Spirit, our emptiness cries after your fullness! Come, Spirit Creator, make your dwelling in our world, our Churches, our homes, our hearts!"

Amen.