

Pentecost Sunday

31st May 2020 - Klippies Kritzinger

Dear friends, we have arrived at Day 50 of Easter and Day 65 of the national covid-19 emergency. It is the Day of Pentecost, the Jewish Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) that brought crowds of pilgrims to Jerusalem to see and hear and feel the outpouring of the Holy Spirit “on all flesh.” But what does all that mean for us today? The Bible uses surprisingly diverse images for the work of the Holy Spirit. There are the powerful images of *wind* and *fire* in Acts 2, the (slowly maturing) *fruit* of the Spirit in Galatians 5, the dynamic *gifts* of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, then the “more excellent” *way* of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 13 (wedged between chapters 12 and 14) to nail the charismatic gifts firmly to the ground. There is both dynamic change and slow growth, fast movement and quiet stillness, a *dove* coming down from heaven (Matthew 3:16) and *groans* coming up from inside of us (Rom 8:23). All of this rich treasure is ours to celebrate and appropriate anew today.

As we celebrate Pentecost this year in a country (and a world) in deep trouble – medically, economically, politically and spiritually – I highlight only three images: eyes, wind and embrace.

Eyes

Stephan has written a moving reflection about Acts 3 on Thursday, showing how “Look at us!” was the moment that started the transformation of a lame man sitting and begging at the Beautiful Gate. We keep on calling gates beautiful when there are such ugly and sub-human realities right in front of them. Our beautiful gates keep people out, make them invisible. In the same way that the rich man no longer saw Lazarus lying at his gate, we no longer see and those sitting outside the gate no longer have the courage to lift up their eyes to look anybody in the eye. But then the Holy Spirit, the “go-between God” intervenes to make us all see:

The Holy Spirit is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware. Supremely and primarily he opens my eyes to Christ. But he also opens my eyes to the brother in Christ, or the fellow-man, or the point of need, or the heartbreaking brutality and the equally heartbreaking beauty of the world. He is the giver of that vision without which the people perish. We so commonly speak about him as the source of power. But in fact he enables us not by making us supernaturally strong but by opening our eyes (John V. Taylor, *The go-between God*, 1972, p. 19).

We no longer use such gender-excluding language, but the point is clear: The Holy Spirit makes beautiful things happen outside the gate, as our eyes meet and we are all transformed into a shared humanity, and enter the sanctuary together. That is what is so beautiful about the work that you have been doing in your shelter these past three months. You have shown us what it means to really see homeless people – so that we can learn to see ourselves.

Proverbs 27:20 speaks about another way of seeing:

Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are human eyes (NIV)

Many of us are guilty of seeing with such hungry, greedy, *eating* eyes. We devour people because we are always on the lookout for what we can get out of them, how we can use them. In crude and subtle ways we make people into food, just by the way we look at them. The scary truth of this verse is that to see in such a greedy and selfish way is to be transformed into the image of Death, to follow the way of the Underworld. But the Holy Spirit, who opens our eyes to see – and to be seen – brings life, raises the lame onto their feet to jump for joy. Like Zacchaeus, we often prefer to see without being seen, to hide in the comfortable branches of our sycamore trees, behind fig leaves that proclaim our innocence and confirm our observer status. The Spirit of Jesus does not leave us up there, but brings us down to the ground, to start sharing what we have with Jesus – and with his followers – and to start making restitution. And so the church of Pentecost shared what they had, so that none of them was in need (Acts 2:45-46). “There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). Their eyes had been opened to see themselves in others, to love others “as themselves” by practising economic justice. That was the most amazing miracle of Pentecost – and you have enacted that miracle in some way too by running your shelter. Now we need to work to try and make the shelters sustainable and permanent. Is that a dream? Yes, but isn’t that precisely why the Spirit was poured out: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...” (Acts 2:17). May the Spirit of the living God open enough eyes in Tshwane to make this dream become a reality.

In that amazing vision of the Ascension in Revelation 5 the Lord Jesus is announced as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who has conquered and is worthy to take the scroll from the right hand of God. But then he appears as a Lamb “as if it had been slaughtered,” with seven horns and seven eyes – seven horns (total power) and seven eyes (perfect sight). And then the seven eyes are explained as “the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (Rev 5:6). The seven eyes are seven spirits (the fullness of the Spirit), sent out into (and poured out onto) the whole of the earth to see what is going on and to open our eyes to see like God: not with greedy, eating eyes, but with kind, feeding, life-giving eyes. The way you have been seeing people in your shelter.

Wind

Usually we assume that the wind of the Spirit is blowing from behind us, pushing us forward and outward, to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And that is true; but not always. Sometimes the Spirit of God blows into our faces – bringing us to a standstill, stopping us in our tracks. The wind blows where it chooses (John 3:8). The wild Wind of God is not under our control, not “our” Spirit who is automatically “the wind beneath our wings” or “the wind in our sails.” The covid-19 pandemic has brought us to the ground with a bump and stopped us dead in our tracks. In this time I feel the wind of the Spirit blowing in my face, driving a lot of dirt and cobwebs of comfortable assumptions out of my mind. How much have I taken for granted that is not at all obvious? Who are the people I simply took for granted – or never even noticed?

It is only when we turn around that the wind will be behind our backs and begin to push us forward. What are the uncomfortable truths that the wild Wind of God is blowing into our faces at this time?

Embrace

In the benediction that we find in 2 Corinthians 13:13 “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” is pronounced over us. Some versions translate the Greek word *koinonia* that is used in this verse as “the communion of the Holy Spirit.” So the Holy Spirit brings about communion or fellowship, but those two words have

become a bit tired from over-use. I suggest we speak of the embrace of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit opens our eyes, making them kind and life-giving, and as the Spirit blows us off our feet, into the opposite direction, we find ourselves embraced and embracing, welcomed by God's Spirit into a new humanity of joy and justice.

The covid-19 pandemic has already taught us a number of lessons. One that we still need to learn is how to greet – now that we will not be able to shake hands or hug for a long time. We need a new way to greet. How do we express the embrace of the Holy Spirit when we meet, while observing a safe physical distance? Bumping elbows is one way to do it, but it is a bit contrived and has no symbolic meaning. Our Hindu friends and neighbours fold their hands in front of their chests and say "Namaste" (in Hindi) or "Vanakum" (in Tamil). That is a beautiful gesture, which means "I bow to you." We could adopt that, but I prefer a greeting that emerges from the heart of our Christian faith. So I suggest that we use the sign for "love" in sign language. It is to cross your arms in front of your chest with your hands touching your shoulders. It is a distant embrace, conveying love and warm acceptance. In the Russian Orthodox tradition it is also the gesture that believers use when walking forward in church to receive the Eucharist. For them it is a sign of the cross and of the Greek letter X (Chi) representing *Christos* (Christ). So it expresses the confession: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). This is a rich and powerful symbol of sharing the life of Christ and experiencing "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" – that radical embrace and acceptance across all human barriers which the Holy Spirit makes possible between us, as our eyes are opened and we learn to see in kind, life-giving ways. Could that work? Will it catch on?

Prayer

Eternal God

On this national day of prayer, we pray with people of all churches and religions
We praise you for giving us life and breath and everything else
We acknowledge your Lordship over all
We praise you for pouring out your eye-opening and life-giving Spirit over us
For embracing us in your eternal love

Holy God

We confess to you our greedy, eating eyes
The ways in which we have used, abused and ignored people created in your image
We feel the wind of your Spirit burning our eyes, forcing us to stop – and to turn around
Forgive our sins and give us a new heart and a new mind
Fill us with the courage to do your will

Merciful God

Please deliver our country from the covid-19 pandemic
Protect those who are most vulnerable
Heal those who have contracted the virus
Comfort those who have lost family members to the virus
Bless the medical personnel who are caring for the sick,
working long hours in difficult circumstances
Protect them from getting infected
Make us all responsible and caring – to protect ourselves and others

Give wisdom to the government to lead us with wisdom and integrity
Give wisdom to church leaders as they consider the resumption of worship
Help us to protect those who are most at risk
And to stand where your stand – with those who suffer

In the name of Jesus Christ,
The Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Lamb who was slain
Who holds the scroll of history in his hand
our crucified, risen and glorified Lord
Amen