

Fire and Wind and a few Helpful Instructions

Today is Pentecost Sunday. The day of the gift of the Holy Spirit! Today we usually hear from the Acts of the Apostles about the Upper Room filling with fire and wind, and the fearful, cowering disciples suddenly filled with courage and multilingualism, preaching and becoming full-on evangelists.

I have had my own Spirit-filled experiences and I know the sense of sudden change that comes with these. But I also know that I often feel a bit un-pumped-up and somewhat lacking in evangelical zeal. It may be because I am an old fashioned Anglican at heart.

But today we actually get John's Gospel (Jn 14:8-17, 25-27) on the Holy Spirit. A bit more thoughtful.

Frustrated by Phillip's sense that he still cannot imagine what God is like, Jesus says, "Listen you dolt! Knowing God isn't about having a photo, it's not about a set of dogmas or creeds, it isn't something you can own. If you want to know God, then look at me. Look at the Way I live my life. Look at the Truth which guides my actions, beliefs and dealings with people. Look at the vibrancy, the freedom of spirit, the richness and openness of my Life. When you learn to look at me, then you get to see the heart of the Father. The way I live is an expression of the love and passion and unswerving reality of God. If you live in this way then you will be able to be like me."

Seeing their crest-fallen faces, and dim incomprehension Jesus says, a little more kindly, "I will place my Spirit of Holiness within you. She will rest in you."

They still have that deer-in-the-headlights look. So Jesus reduces it to something that they can understand. "Just do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid. OK?"

I have a tendency to worry, to be afraid of possible bad outcomes. I can dwell on these if I am not careful. I can also, under other circumstances, become quite caught up in desires and hopes. I have a long-time lusting after Volvo Station-wagons which I cannot quite explain, and I am susceptible to advertisements, especially for things at reduced prices. I could fall in love easily. It is not just "trouble and fear" that my heart has to deal with. There are a whole crowd of things in my heart that move around strongly.

Many of you know that we have a dog, Kita, who is now 2 years old. But recently we got a second dog, Mina. She is a little younger, another rescue dog, and she has less idea of how to walk on a leash than Kita. The difficulty of walking one dogs is considerably increased with two. Kita would swerve for a good smell, lunge at a distant squirrel, tug to see a friend, or just cross in front of me for no clear reason. But Mina does all of that at higher speed, and not in the same order. A dog leash in each hand I go down the street like someone dancing, or, more like a person having a series of fits. I can barely keep on the sidewalk! The first job of dog ownership is getting on top of the dog-walk. In the two weeks we have had two dogs it is gradually getting better.

It came to me, walking these brutes, that this was not unlike what Jesus was teaching in John's Gospel, about the Holy Spirit.

Jesus knows us. He knows that you and I have hearts full of strong pulls and pushes. He knows we get caught up in them. "Oh," We say, "life would be so much better with a dish-washer!" And so it becomes an obsession to find one, re-arrange the kitchen, and get it installed. For a week we are delighted. Then it occurs to us that a flat screen TV would bring us utter happiness, and we are off again! But two weeks later, guess what? The itch is still there and the dishwasher and TV have not made it go away. That is the happiness the world gives; short lived and expensive. The same thing happens in reverse.

"Look at me, in a dead-end job. I am such a failure!" or "Why am I married to this person?" or "Way aren't I married to somebody?" or "If only I had more meaning in my life!" or "Will I have enough money to get through the year?"

We get pulled this way and that, accelerated, stopped in our tracks, zigzagging and lurching along.

For the disciples Jesus knew that when he left they would be troubled and afraid. So that was what he spoke about. He didn't say, "Don't worry. Be happy!" which is glib. He knew they would worry. He knows we do. He knows we get pulled this way and that. It is part of being human.

What Jesus did say was "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid.*"

Do not let them sit there and soak up fear and anxiety!

Do not get stuck in the emotions of your heart!

Our feelings are like internal weather systems. You know how a cold front sweeps into Toronto and we all shiver. You know about snow and sticky heat.

In BC there is a very Christ-like saying; "There is no such thing as bad weather, just inadequate clothing!" When the weather changes smart people adapt, they dress appropriately. We don't sit in the snow, in our shorts, and allow ourselves to freeze to death.

Jesus says "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid.*" Don't let them stay there.

So what do you do about your hearts pulling desires and defeating hopelessness?

Ask God about them.

I say to God, "Oh, look at that Volvo stationwagon. Wouldn't it be fine for me to have one!" And God says, "Yes. But don't you have a car? Isn't your car just perfect for you right now? Isn't it paid for too?" "Well, yes." I reply, and God says, "They are pretty, though." "True." I say, as the tail lights disappear round the corner. And then we move on.

I say to God, "How will my children find their way through life? Will they find love? Will they be happy?" and my heart is filled with anxiety. And God says, "When you were their age were you much different? And weren't the bumps along the way what you remember best? They need to work their way through like you did." And I reply, "But who will help them?" and God says, "I could, you know. I am fond of them too."

It is by prayer that we open the closed door of our worried hearts, our over-excited hearts, our fearful, proud, desirous, scattered hearts, we open them to God's Spirit.

Slowly, as with my tugging dogs, God trains us to know that each pull is not worth breaking your neck over. God teaches us that the tugging of our heart strings matter, but do not run us. We are having the feelings, not the feelings having us. To follow the Way of Christ is to open every aspect of our hearts (the ones we are proud of and the ones we are ashamed of) to God. To hold to the Truth is to know that our compass settings for our life (Justice, mercy, faith, hope, honesty, compassion, refusal to judge, kindness to others....) are more important than the distractions and chatter of our immediate feelings. To live the vibrant Life of Christ is to let God lift us out of the cycle of self-gratification followed by emptiness followed by the next fad. Let God lift us into the life of stability of spirit and safety of being held in his love, and the self-respect of knowing we have a discipline as disciples of Jesus, of being always at peace with ourselves because all our decisions are made with God's conversation.

This is called, "living in the Spirit".

It is not the heady stuff of wind and flame, it is do-able advice being followed.

"*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid.*" Bring your hearts to God, and in so doing, you let God into your heart. And there the Spirit of God will come to dwell, and you will have peace.

Happy Pentecost !