

**Sermon at St Paul's Presbyterian Church, Napier**  
**LIVING IN GOD'S-SPIRIT IN A DIVIDED AND**  
**TROUBLED WORLD.**

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“The Acts of the Apostles begins with a parable-like reflection on the new possibility that had gripped the minds and hearts of those who followed the Way pioneered by Jesus. They lived in a society dominated by Roman power: difference was not tolerated; political and social uniformity was demanded of those who lived in this powerful empire. At the heart of the Jesus Way was the possibility of all people learning from one another, discovering God-life in their differences as well as in what they shared. They sought a society transformed by listening love. Is it possible to live this way? The church still lives within the question and in following the footsteps of Jesus points the way into what could be.

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and

Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

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Our lesson from Acts 2: 1-13, traditionally read on Pentecost Sunday is a storied expression of the Christian Way that was treasured in the early church because it answered important questions about life and relationships and the presence of God within the human family. It tells of how a group of dispirited Jesus’s admirers were filled with fresh confidence that the Way pioneered by Jesus opened the door to new possibilities for living in their divided, unhearing, unjust and difficult world.

The Acts of the Apostles was written by the same author of the Gospel of Luke who intended his two volumes to be an introduction to a Way of life shaped by the experience and teaching of Jesus. In his Gospel Luke describes Jesus as a man energised by God-Spirit, led by God-Spirit and dying within God-Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles, he describes how the first Christian communities were energised by the same inspired energy and purpose that energised and gave direction to the life of Jesus. In both Gospel and Acts Luke contrasts their way of life with life shaped by obedience to an all-powerful Roman Emperor and the injustices, judgemental harshness, brutality and intolerance of Roman power. The Pentecost Story in Acts 2 focuses on a foundational aspect of the counter cultural and civilisation-changing way of life

promoted by the earliest Christian communities. In a world shaped by intolerance and division they were learning, sometimes with difficulty, how to hear, appreciate, understand and embrace people from backgrounds other than their own and to build communities representing this way of life.

As the developing Jesus movement grew and explored what it meant to live within the Way pioneered by Jesus, they had to work their way through a problem that would not go away: the human community is so divided, we seem to be incapable of hearing or appreciating one another's wisdom. We are so shaped by religious, racial, national and cultural prejudices that we might as well be living in different locked rooms. They asked if this sort of division between people was an unchanging part of human existence or whether the Way pioneered by Jesus pointed to another possibility, another dynamic, a pathway into cooperation and understanding between groups and individuals who had been taught to distrust each other. They recalled how Jesus was a boundary breaker, walking across boundaries of misunderstanding and prejudice that divided women and men, Samaritan and Jew, Roman and Palestinian, Canaanite and Israeli and they wondered how this boundary breaking appreciation of all people regardless of their cultural, sexual, religious or national background could be part of their living. Even if it meant that some thought they were crazy or drunk!

The story of that first Pentecost day reads like a parable-like description of what they were discovering and for what they hoped. People from many places and shaped by different cultures are learning to hear and appreciate each other, their wisdom being valued, traditional boundaries of nationality,

language and culture being broken down and new ways of being together being discovered. It is said that though those present came from different places and cultures and spoke different languages they understood each other and presumably could learn from one other. The achievement of human unity, of life in a just and caring society, was a central concern of Jesus and of first century Christian house churches. To symbolise this aspiration when they met each Sunday, they shared a simple meal: an everyday symbol of equality, acceptance, inclusion and belonging.

This Pentecost possibility could be a parable for our times. The human community of the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains cruelly divided, prone to violence and fear of those who are different. As a society we're not good at hearing one another and including the needs of others in our dreams of what could be. The daily news brings us a dreary litany of tales of human division, misunderstanding, violence and greed. On a day when the church reads and ponders Luke's Pentecost story, I find myself asking if life together can be rebuilt around the Pentecost vision of a people learning to hear, understand and care for each other, who value difference yet who consistently seek for unity: call it friendship in the presence of difference or, if you prefer, life in the spirit.

In passing, let me say that as a Parish Minister I have seen and heard of some bizarre behaviours attributed to life in the spirit (uncontrollable laughter, gibberish speaking, bogus healings). I've never felt comfortable with this understanding of Spirit - it feels too much like an escape from life into a sort of parallel and indulgent universe and to elevate marginal comments by Paul about speaking in tongues beyond their long-term

importance. For me the term Holy Spirit has become so sullied by such views that I prefer to speak of “God-Spirit” rather than “Holy Spirit”. For me “God-Spirit” preserves the ever presentness of Spirit in and through all that is, rather than as an imagined figure who occasionally interferes with dramatic intensity in human living – and incidentally, but significantly, gives power and importance to those who believe and behave in an approved manner. Luke’s story of the First Pentecost seems to me to be best understood as a parable- like interpretation of what it means to live within way of Jesus, within the same Spirit that energised and gave shape to his living, rather than as an accurate account of a historical happening.

Holy Spirit, or for me God-Spirit, is simply a name for God and takes its place among the scores of names given to God in the Bible and in the Holy Books of other faiths. Muslims apply one hundred names to God with a suggestion that one name remains unspoken – it is simply, yet profoundly, silence before the mystery. When God is described as Holy Spirit the emphasis is placed on God as enduring and universal presence in us and in every person we meet, in every part of creation and in every discovery that brings enrichment to human living. God-Spirit is like a whispered energy of love that gives meaning and purpose to human living. In choosing to refer to God as Spirit Luke takes sides in a debate that continues into our day: should God be imagined as Almighty Lord, all knowing, all powerful, all judging (like a Roman Emperor) or should God be imagined as Spirit flowing like water, blowing like an unseen breeze, burning like a warm fire, within and around us – unseen, persuasive rather than coercive, ever present yet unable to be fully described, more like a cluster of

attitudes shaped by inclusive love. Christians who, across the centuries, have understood God as an all-powerful heavenly ruler and who have appointed themselves to be human agents of their god's judgement and punishment have done great harm. Some dreadful things have been done and continue to be done in the name of their all-powerful and judging God. The servant way pioneered by Jesus, human expression of God-Spirit, builder of good human community, has too often been overlooked. For Luke, however, it's the clue to understanding what Jesus was up to.

This parable - like tale serves as a preface to Luke's account of the counter- cultural way being explored by early Christian communities seeking to live in continuity with the way pioneered by Jesus. The narrative that follows in Acts describes the bravery of small communities of the Jesus Way who challenged the power, predictability, punishments and prejudices of the Roman Empire. This is the empire that regarded its emperor as an all - powerful and all-knowing God whose demand for obedience was absolute. Our Pentecost parable describes another possibility: people hearing, understanding, and respecting the wisdom and life styles of those who belonged to other nationalities, other cultures. Every person, every neighbour, every culture is regarded as being upheld and energised by the same God-Spirit. It is therefore appropriate that they be received as full members of the human family, their experience respected and their wisdom woven into the fabric of life. This was, according to Luke, the path followed by Jesus and in Acts he describes how the earliest Jesus followers, like Jesus, respected and welcomed people from all backgrounds into their communities: Samaritans, Palestinian Jews, Greek speaking Jews, Samaritans,

Macedonians, Cretans, an Ethiopian eunuch, people from every strata of society. They were all regarded as being held within the same God-Spirit even though shaped by customs, cultures, behaviours and aspirations that differed from those of the Palestinian Jewish community of which Luke remained a loyal member. Paul, also a proud Jew, summed up this inclusive, spirit - infused understanding of life: “If you have clothed yourself with Christ there is no longer, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, all of you are one.” Different yet One: Different ways yet held within one unifying Spirit.

There’s more that could be said about what Luke was getting at in his Pentecostal parable. But it’s more important to briefly identify the sort of agenda our text suggests for us who in our time and place seek to live in continuity with the Way of Jesus and who, with him, recognise that all people are Spirit bearers and their pain, wisdom and experience needs to be respected. It’s a big agenda and I’ll just mention three current agenda items.

The building of bridges between the great religions of our world is clearly on our agenda: respecting and working with people who also speak of God even though in different words and from within different cultures. It’s part of our contribution to peacemaking in our troubled world. The strongly argued case by Maori seeking to play a more significant share in the governance of our Treaty based nation is an invitation to listen carefully and appreciatively to the pain and aspirations of a people cruelly dispossessed of their land and dignity in colonising days and since. I recall how in earlier days it was common to say, “I am colour blind, everyone is the same to me.” But since those innocent days Maori and Pacifica, along

with Muslims, Hindus and others, have insisted: “we want to be seen as who we are, as we understand ourselves, in our difference as well as in our sameness.” As we face the ongoing challenge represented by the growing gap between rich and poor it certainly entails a fresh sensitivity to the pain and disadvantage experienced by those whose experience of life is genuinely tough – we need to listen carefully to their experience, their wisdom, their aspirations and include them as full partners, secure in a Spirit - infused world. The need to listen to and learn with those who we experience as being ‘different’ to us extends from neighbourhood friendships to relationships between great nations and cultures. It’s challenging, it can be tough but it’s central for those living within the Spirit that gave direction to Jesus.

The inability (or is it defiant refusal?) of the human family to live together in appreciative unity continues to cast a shadow over life and the Pentecost promise of what could be still beckons. The story of Pentecost is, I think, not just an ancient tale to be read in churches but is more like a universal parable of what might be. It represents a hope, a possibility yet to be received, lived and explored within the ambiguities and divisions of human living, a storied possibility of what church and world might become. The hope remains that, as in the Pentecost story, we may discover how to live in God-Spirit, that we may hear, understand and appreciate one other.