

Pentecost/Harvest Festival

Cathedral 19 May 2013

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7:30; 9:30; 19:00.

Opening Prayer

1. Introduction to Pentecost

Today, Pentecost Sunday, is the second most important day in the church calendar, after Easter. It marks the official beginning of the Christian church. Hence it is the Church's BIRTHDAY.

The festival of Pentecost had its origins in the Old Testament. For the Jews, it was a **harvest festival**, (like we are celebrating today). It also commemorated the giving of the law to Moses on Mt Sinai, when God set the Israelite nation apart to be his chosen people, a holy nation.

Legend has it that when the law was given the angels of God took it from Mt Sinai to all the four corners of the earth.

In our reading from Acts today, we see that people from all the known nations of the earth were gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. The disciples heard what sounded like a rushing wind, and saw what looked like tongues of fire, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them. (hence the liturgical colour is red- fire- and the bishop's mitre is shaped like a flame). They received the power to be witnesses and spoke in tongues (gift of the Spirit) so that all present heard the gospel message in their own language. The **Spirit gave birth** to the Christian Church; many were converted, and later took the Good News back home with them to all the corners of the earth.

1.1 Today's focus

There are so many themes one could unpack concerning the Holy Spirit (who the HS is; what the HS does, fruit, gifts, role of HS in the life of the ind/the church etc) and relating to Harvest Festival.

Joke: It makes me feel like uttering the prayer of the boy who fell into a tub of treacle. As he rose to the surface he said "O God, make my tongue equal to this opportunity"!

Today, as we consider themes concerning both

- the **Holy Spirit**- being **Pentecost**;
- as well as giving thanks for **God's goodness shown in creation**- being **Harvest**;

I have decided to weave these two themes together in perhaps a somewhat different approach. I have chosen to explore some of the Biblical imagery associated with:

God the Holy Spirit, in the work of creation.

2. God the Holy Spirit gives birth to creation

First, a preliminary question.

Who is God? What is God like? It is not easy to imagine God, because God is Spirit- immortal, invisible, infinite. We cannot put God in a neat box- for God is far greater than our minds will ever comprehend. So God has given us, in the scriptures, a variety of images, metaphors, pictures- to help us try and understand a little more clearly who God is. No one image is complete in itself- but each adds a different perspective, a different angle, to enhance our understanding of God.

Most of us are probably familiar with images such as God being like a Father, King, Judge, Ruler, Lord, Shepherd (or Rock, Fortress...). You will notice that most of these images are predominantly masculine ones.

What about God the Holy Spirit?

It is interesting to note that in both Hebrew and the Syriac language, the word for Spirit (ruach=Hebrew & ruah=Syriac) is a **feminine noun**, and writers in those languages used **maternal images** when speaking of the Holy Spirit. Some recent theologians, while retaining

masculine reference to Father and Son, have explored feminine alternatives for the Holy Spirit. (see *Wikipedia article- Gender of the Holy Spirit*)

Before anyone has a heart attack or assumes I am about to impose a radical feminist approach on you and insist you call God “She” or “Mother” from now on- FEAR NOT! However I invite you to journey with me to explore just one way in which the Holy Spirit is portrayed in feminine imagery in the context of creation. Let us consider how this particular image might give us a new perspective, and so enrich and enhance our understanding of God.

In the Nicene Creed, we affirm our faith by saying “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the **giver of life**”.

In the opening verses of Genesis (chapter 1), we read of the Spirit of God (ruach- feminine) hovering over the water (like a bird), intimately involved in the act of creation. We are given a picture of God the Holy Spirit waiting to give birth to all the Word will say – “and God said let there be...and it was so” (whether it be the land, sky, animals, plants, human beings) as if the Spirit ‘mothers creation’.

In our Psalm today we read (Ps 104:30) “When you send your Spirit they are created and you renew the face of the earth”. We can imagine the picture of God giving birth to all of creation- it comes from the womb of God.

Is this perhaps rather a surprising use of language? Well, it is interesting to note that in Job (Job 38:28,29), God, referring to herself as creator, says “From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost..?” Implication- from MINE.

In the Old Testament, it is evident that the Jewish people certainly understood the image of God being like a mother who gave birth to them, for example:

- (*Deut 32:18*) Moses reprimands the people “..you forgot the God who gave you birth”
- (*Isaiah 46:*) God says “Listen to me..you who have been borne by me...carried from the womb...”
- (*Numbers 11:11-14*) Moses complains to God about the people of Israel “Was it **I** who conceived these people? Was it **I** who gave them birth?” ..the implication being- no God, it was **YOU** so **you** had better take responsibility for them and deal with them!

Jesus takes us a step further with this birth imagery, when he speaks of the Holy Spirit going beyond just creation to RE-creation. Not only does the Spirit give birth and life, but eternal life.

In response to Nicodemus question in John 3, concerning how to enter the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells him that he needs to be “born again” (born from above, born from the Spirit.). Puzzled, Nicodemus asks:

“How can one be born a 2nd time- enter again your mother’s womb?”

Jesus explains that to enter the Kingdom of God one has to be born of water **and the spirit**. What is born of the flesh, is flesh, **what is born of the Spirit, is spirit**. To be born of the flesh is to emerge from the womb of a human mother, to be born of the Spirit is to emerge from the womb of the divine mother. This happens when we receive and believe in Jesus – the Spirit cause us to be born again into the family of God and become children of God (John 1:12). In this way, through the Spirit we are given the gift of abundant life, life in all its fullness, eternal life.

In John’s Gospel Jesus tells his disciples that the Spirit, the Advocate will come (*also uses the terms Counsellor, Comforter*), the Spirit of truth. The Spirit will “Live with you and be in you” and “be with you for ever”. (John 14:16, 17)

So the Spirit gives birth, gives life, eternal life and continues to live in us.

As the Spirit lives in us, so she continues to create in and through us. We discover she manifests in us the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace

etc Gal 5:22). She releases in us a wide variety of gifts of the Spirit – both individually and corporately- to edify others and build up the church (see 1 Cor 12). She uses us to continue Her work of renewing the earth.

3.How might this image of God the Holy Spirit giving birth to creation shed new light on our relationship with God?

I would like offer two suggestions. I believe this image highlights:

- a) God's closeness to us,
- b) and God's love for us

a)God's closeness to us

In Gen 2, we have a different image of God creating – this time, like a Potter, God forms or moulds man from the dust of the earth (clay). But in this image, God is DISTANT from and DIFFERENT to his creation (eg a pot does not resemble the potter).

However when God creates like a mother, giving birth to us - the implication is that we are CLOSE to and SIMILAR to God in a way that mother and child are.

We are told that we, humans, were made in “the image and likeness of God”. I am sure that in your families, you love to spot the similarities- looks, personality, characteristics, mannerisms, abilities...(I love it when people tell me one or other daughter is like me!). There is a resemblance, a special bond, a close sense of affinity and kinship. Like babies, we are similar to(resemble) God our mother.

The relationship between a mother and child is unique. While the baby is being formed in his/her mother's womb, they are joined by an umbilical chord- this is how the mother's body feeds and nourishes the foetus. After birth, especially in those early weeks, months and years, the baby is totally and utterly dependant on his/her mother for everything- food, love, care, protection... creating a strong bond. The

same is true of our relationship with God. “Remain in me and I in you, for apart from me you can do nothing” (Jesus in John 15:4)

So I believe this image highlights God’s intimate, close relationship to us. All of us, male and female, have our mother’s womb as our first home. What better imagery could there be to express the basic reality of our existence as stated by the apostle Paul (Acts 17:28): “In God we live and move and have our being.” (Although Paul doesn’t mention the womb, at no other time in human experience do we exist within another person).

b)The image of God giving birth to her creation sheds insight on **the nature of God’s love for us.**

Some theologies emphasise what rotten, sinful people we are, who will never be good enough and are lost in darkness and facing condemnation....(Children often seem to think God is like a stern judge, with a long white beard sitting in the clouds with a big stick waiting to punish me when I do wrong.) In spite of that, while we were yet sinners, Christ for us, to save us (Romans) (eg Songs: “Sinners whose love can never forget the wormwood and the gall...” and “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a WRETCH like me..)

Now I acknowledge there is some truth in that – we are sinners in need of repentance and God’s grace- however I struggle to find it a very attractive view of God’s love. I don’t know about you, but I long to know that I am loved not just in spite of who I am, but also for who I am. Someone precious, valuable, lovable....

God the mother’s creative love emphasises this kind of love. Let’s face it- new born babies can be pretty ugly (squished, crinkly, screwed up eyes...) Ask any mother- my baby is the most beautiful and cute baby in the whole world! (only a mother can love like that!) A mother doesn’t

judge her baby by objective/critical standards- she loves her baby simply because it is her own flesh and blood!

Mother God, the Holy Spirit, looks at her creation, her baby, and pronounces in the words found in Genesis: "Behold, it is very good!" We could add: "I take pride in you. You are precious to me and I love you just because you are mine. You don't have to prove anything to me."

What a wonderful picture of God's love!

Furthermore it is the same affirming Spirit who pours God's love into our hearts, and who testifies that we are indeed God's beloved children (Romans 8:16).

4. Conclusion

On this Pentecost and Harvest festival day, we give thanks for God's **love** shown to us through the Holy Spirit in creation – (creation of all God's good gifts, the produce of our land, and of ourselves.)

Prayer:

Creative, life-giving Spirit
 come and be born in us afresh today;
 fill us with your life
 enfold us with your love
 manifest in us your fruit
 release in us your gifts
 use us to continue your work of renewing the earth. Amen.

9.30 To close: The Choir sings a song depicting the Holy Spirit:

ENEMY OF APATHY

1. She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters.
 Hovering on the chaos of the world's first day;
 She sighs and she sings,

mothering creation,
Waiting to give birth to all the Word will say.

2. She wings over earth,
resting where she wishes,
Lighting close at hand or soaring through the skies;
She nests in the womb,
welcoming each wonder,
Nourishing potential hidden to our eyes.

3. She dances in fire,
startling her spectators,
Waking tongues of ecstasy where dumbness reigned;
She weans and inspires all whose hearts are open,
nor can she be captured,
silenced or retrained.

4. For she is the Spirit,
one with God in essence,
Gifted by the Saviour in eternal love;
She is the key opening the scriptures,
Enemy of apathy and heavenly dove.

1988 The Iona Community

References:

- Mollenkott, V R 1989. The Divine Feminine- The Biblical Imagery of God as Female. Crossroad: New York.*
Wikipedia article- Gender of the Holy Spirit)