

The Gift of the Life-Giver for an Old, Tired World

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: May 28, 2023

Readings

Genesis 11.1-9

Psalms 104.24-35

Acts 2.1-21

John 14.8-17

Opening

When I was young, especially in my high school years, I had several friends decades older than myself. Because of church. Before and after Sunday services, at Wednesday night church, I gravitated to older people as much, if not more than, kids my own age. Fr Aaron Wright, rector of Old North Abbey, has been my best friend since those years, We were in the same high school youth group. The two of us sidled up to the seasoned saints of our church after every service. We sought Charlie Evans, in his 80s when we were in high school. The Lord had radically saved Evans from a life of wild drinking and fighting in beer halls. Evans had one of those weathered faces, full of wrinkles, yet look in his eyes and I saw someone as young as myself. I started preaching in those years and Evans said to me before one of those Sundays: 'Go at 'em with both barrels today!' I had no idea what that meant, but I knew hemeant give us all you have.

Maybe I sought saints like Evans and other elders because of temperament, but I think there's something deeper than affinity here. When I think about the older friends I had when I was young, I notice that they, too, were young, even if my friends were in their 40s, 60s, or 80s. I didn't seek older friends simply for wisdom. Though I didn't have language for it then, I realize that I was drawn to people who had fire inside. Not a temporary flame of emotion that burns out, but the fire of love, a holy yearning, a burning joy, that God alone can give.

I sought the friendship of older saints whose faith was more mature and yet more childlike than my own. I didn't pursue saints simply for the dramatic or radical quality of their testimonies. I was drawn to saints whose story was *alive*; who had a 'living and active' faith; who lived, not on the faith of yesteryear; whose faith had *not* grown tired or old, but whose lives were constantly being made new by the indwelling Holy Spirit. I needed saints for whom Pentecost was not a matter of biblical history or even personal history, an event from the past; but an ongoing reality, made ever new by the life-giving Holy Spirit.

A New Feast, More Than a Memorial

'I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, *the Life-giver*.' That's the phrase we confess every Sunday in the Nicene Creed, a phrase so familiar that we may miss what we actually confess. I believe that the Holy Spirit is not only Lord, I believe the Spirit is the Life-giver. That is his Name, too. For you grammarians, notice that name contains a verb. 'Life-giver' has a past, present, and future quality. This is the very essence of God the Holy Spirit for all eternity; and for all time and all ages, for all people and all nations. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, God the Holy Spirit is the Life-giver.

This is Who descended and descends *now* upon the Church—the Holy Spirit, the Life-giver. This is Who we invoke to descend upon water so that through water Soren and Brooks Mitchell are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Life-giver. Every time we invoke the Holy Spirit's presence, the Spirit is doing something new; giving life to newborn sons and daughters, breathing life anew into the hearts of saints who long for his renewing presence.

So Pentecost is not a memorial; it is a Feast. What's the difference? In a memorial, you activate your brain 'remember, do not forget.' Memorials are important, but they are not the same as a feast. With a spiritual feast, you remember God's action in the past and believe that past reality is doing something **newnow**; that the past event is living and active. It is not a story that is tired or grown old, it is living and new.

With a spiritual feast, you feed your hunger; a hunger you may have ignored, suppressed, or refused, but a hunger that will not go away. You and I are more hungry for the Life-Giver than we realize. Your soul is not hungry simply to *remember* Pentecost. Your soul is hungry to *experience* Pentecost anew, the fire of the Holy Spirit living and burning within.

Each of us hunger for that personal, perpetual Pentecost within, but note well that Pentecost is a feast of the *Church*, not of the Christian in solitude. A feast is not a meal taken in privacy. It is a gathering. In fact, the origin of Pentecost begins with Israel at Mount Sinai when the Lord required a pilgrimage to Jerusalem each year to celebrate the feast. That's why the nations were gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit descended on the Church in the Upper Room.

The Whole Gospel

Look with me at the cover of your bulletin, the icon of Pentecost. Seated around the table are the apostles who had been waiting in the Upper Room, obeying Jesus' promise to wait for power from heaven. The first time I viewed this icon, everything looked familiar to me from the scriptural story of Pentecost in Acts 2. Naturally, then, I wondered about the figure at the bottom of the image. It is an old man surrounded by darkness, yet he is crowned. This figure represents the nations of the world, crowned with authority, yet weary, tired, and grown old because of sin. He is waiting for the Gospel, waiting for the Apostles to come and proclaim the good news of Christ, waiting for sons and daughters of each nation to be born anew by water and the Holy Spirit.

I've spoken on a few occasions the past year about the phrases and statements we hear in our time about exhaustion. It's interesting in the light of Pentecost. 'I can't even. I'm so weary. I'm burned out.' What does the world need? The Holy Spirit, the Life-giver. It is not years that make us old, but sin and all its consequences. For the Christian who lives by the power of the life-giving Spirit, she can live with the joy of a child, greeting the new day, 'Great is your faithfulness, morning by morning, new

mercies I see.' But without that same Holy Spirit living within, we lose our sense of wonder, we chase our desires, the trappings of sin, and they make us old.

G.K. Chesterton said:

It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.

It's so vitally important that the apostles must be filled with the Spirit first and *then* they are sent. He who takes up Jesus' commission in his own strength will grow weary and burn out. The Spirit must descend on the saints first, giving them a power they *cannot* generate in themselves. They must become witnesses by experience before they become messengers of the Gospel. For the Gospel is not only the forgiveness of our sins; it is the good news that God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within to be the Life-Giver forever. The saints are made new so that they will make the world new, a world grown old with sin.

The Fire Within and The Death of Fear

Pentecost is such a familiar story that we take for granted the details of the story. But step back for a moment and consider one more feature of this story: why did the Holy Spirit descend in the form of fire? Why not in the form of a **cloud**? Certainly the Spirit appears in scripture in the form of a cloud. Why not in the form of a **dove**, such as when our Lord Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River?

There must be some divine reason that when the Spirit descends on the church, he chooses the form of fire, a tongued flame above each disciple.

The figure of fire means several things in Scripture, not the least of which is that fire purifies us from our sin; that by a pillar of fire the Lord guides us through the wilderness; that God himself appeared in a burning bush, then on Mount Sinai burning with his glory. So many times in Scripture when we see fire, we see the glory of God.

The Holy Spirit comes in the form of fire above Jesus' disciples because this is where the glory of God now dwells—in the Church.

I think it's also significant that the Holy Spirit comes in the form of fire when we hear Peter proclaim the Gospel and explain what happened. We could look at Peter's sermon itself, though that will be for another day. I'm struck by something else in this moment. I'm seeing this moment in light of Peter's zeal; how he was the first to confess Jesus as the Christ; how he then made a bombastic oath that he would never betray Christ; how he would betray the one he confessed as Christ three times on Maundy Thursday; how from Easter morning to the resurrection appearances of our Lord, he appears disoriented and confused. Yes, I'm hearing the Apostle Peter preach the whole Gospel in light of his whole story. How he was a fiery man who would have just grown old and tired *without* Jesus' forgiveness, without the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit breathed on him anew. But on the Day of Pentecost, we see a man boldly proclaiming the Gospel, restored, redeemed, and revived after his failure.

He who never thought he could leave Christ, was humbled by his fear. And fear threatened a lifelong grip on Peter's soul unless Christ set him free, unless the Holy Spirit breathe on him anew. From the Day of Pentecost, Peter has a new zeal in place of his old fear. His old zeal was in his own strength, but this new zeal, this new boldness comes from the fire of God living and burning within him.

Are you living with a spirit of fear? Fear is what makes us old, not advancing years. Have you been tentative when once you were bold? Has your zeal for the Gospel waned amid all the other obligations of your life? Has your heart become tepid when once it burned with love for Christ? God sends his Spirit today, on this day of Pentecost. Receive the Holy Spirit, the Life-Giver, anew.

It's been the prayer of my heart for Apostles for over a year now that zeal for the Gospel—the fire within—would increase in and through us. God help us, God save us, God keep us young in heart, even as we increase in years. Pentecost keeps us young.

*your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;*

We need this Gospel for our hearts and the world needs this Gospel, too. The Gospel that not only proclaims forgiveness of sins, but the Gospel that proclaims God pours out his Spirit on all flesh, on all nations.

Anglicans are trained to pray for the mission of the Church every single day. Here is one of our daily prayers for mission that must never grow old among us:

*Almighty and everlasting God, who alone works great marvels: Send down upon our clergy and the congregations committed to their charge **the life-giving Spirit of your grace**, shower them with the continual dew of your blessing, and **ignite in them a zealous love of your Gospel**; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

So ignite within us Lord a zeal that renounces timidity and fear; ignite within us joy that transcends circumstances; ignite within us the fire of holy love for your world, your Gospel, and most of all, for you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.