



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 30 May 2004 Pentecost Sunday
Title: **"The Spirit and Forgiveness"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 2: 1-11
Second Reading 1 Corinthians 12: 4-13
Gospel John 20: 19-23

Today we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is linked to the episode that we heard read from the book of Acts with its dramatic effects like a mighty wind and tongues of fire, but it doesn't have to be limited to one historical point or place. That's because the Holy Spirit is meant to fall on us, inspire us, lift us up, convict us (in the best sense of that word) and renew us every time we ask for it. The Spirit is free, the Spirit is generous, and the Spirit is exciting. However, be aware that the Spirit is not just a power source, like an Eveready battery: something you put into an appliance to make it work. That is why the Church long centuries ago began to call God's Spirit a *Person* rather than just a power, a wind or a force. The Spirit is not at our beck and call, but comes on purpose to achieve specific ends.

Far too many people in the world today consider themselves "spiritual" without really understanding what that means. What they're usually trying to say is that they accept the existence of "something out there" that is supernatural and beyond understanding. So far, so good: God is definitely beyond our understanding, and attempts to limit God or to draw boxes around Him, even by the Church, are presumptuous and doomed to failure. Most people who call themselves "spiritual" in this way are doing so to avoid using the word "religious," which significantly first had to do with the bond between humankind and the gods. Those who are "spiritual" but

not religious would like to ignore the commitment of such a bond. Some would rather keep God at a comfortable distance and use divine power like that Eveready battery: power given to do what we want, whatever we want. But God doesn't work that way. He gives the Spirit on purpose and the gift isn't always what we would like it to be.

Take for example the Gospel reading for today. Gospel readings for Pentecost are always a problem since the event that is celebrated on this day isn't actually in the Gospel texts. So instead we have a passage from the Easter story in which Jesus physically enacts the giving of the Spirit by blowing on each of the Apostles as if to symbolize God's powerful, uncontrollable power in the life of the new Church.

But when Christ gives this gift of the Spirit to his followers, he does so with a pronouncement that could be as much a curse as a blessing. Let's hear it again: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

An odd passage for Pentecost, isn't it? At a time when we are supposed to think about the empowerment we have from God, about the new things we can achieve with Him, we have to think about negative things like *sin*. This passage has been used by Christians in several ways over the centuries, not the least of them being to support the authority of the clergy to forgive sins in the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. While that is still an important part of the Church's life, there is more to it than that.

The power to forgive or withhold sins committed against us lies within all people, but it is the special prerogative of the Christian who is the agent of Christ's gift of reconciliation. It is often the door we use either to admit or to bar the Holy Spirit from entering our lives. It is significant, I think, that even when the Anglican Church was at its most Protestant and when private confession had completely fallen out of use as a sacrament, it remained in the rite of the *Visitation of the Sick*. It was realized even then that sins not confessed could burden the soul and the body of the sick person to the degree that God's power to heal could be *blocked*.

This is true in many other facets of our spiritual life: the ability both to *say* we are sorry and to *accept* forgiveness is often the key to the in-pouring of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of a new life in Christ. So too, our refusal either to give or to accept forgiveness is *within our power*, but has *terrible consequences* both for ourselves and the person we believe has wronged us. How many people do you know, as I do, who harbor hatreds, resentments and remembered offences so long that the details of the original problem are forgotten and staying angry over them is like a badge of honor worn to show that one is a “professional victim” all of one’s life. Such an attitude tragically blocks the Holy Spirit’s ability to act in a person. That’s because God chooses to give us free will and the right to say ‘no’ even to the most wonderful of gifts.

John Paul II has said that he begins every morning with a prayer that he not do anything in the day ahead that will stand in the way of the Holy Spirit. That’s not just a prayer for popes, and it also may be that part of our loving outreach to the people who need us is our encouragement to them not to block the Spirit through resentment, anger and regret.

The Prayer Book of the Anglican Church of New Zealand, which we used for our observance of ANZAC Day in April, has a wonderful absolution used after the general confession that underlines the importance of the liberation of forgiveness:

*Through the cross of Christ,
God have mercy on you,
pardon you
and set you free.
Know that you are forgiven
and be at peace.
God strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in eternal life.*

This absolution reminds us that accepting God’s forgiveness *sets us free*.

So before you ask invite the Holy Spirit to enter your life and “rock your world,” be sure to do the necessary “housekeeping” that will provide room for so wonderful and powerful a guest. Get rid of anything that is breakable, like oversensitive feelings that are quick to take offense, and of big, ugly things that are in the way, like resentments that we have let sit in the middle of our lives taking up space and wasting our energy. Actively forgive, or be truly ready to forgive those whom you know or imagine to have sinned against you, and accept God’s willingness to let you start again. Then when everything is clean and ready, open the door and expect to be shocked, overwhelmed, empowered, fulfilled and altogether surprised at a God whom you thought you knew, but who will reveal Himself to you as if for the very first time.

That is what the Holy Spirit is like. That is the Power and the Person whom we celebrate today.