

THE PRESENTATION OF THE SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

The Holy Spirit is the first experience we have of God. It is through the presence of the Spirit that the first disciples were enabled to see in the life and death of Jesus the activity of God. Guided by the Spirit the New Testament bears witness to different ways the first believers interpreted what God was doing in Jesus. Using the Jewish theological concept of apocalyptic eschatology they understood Jesus' life as the ushering in of God's final Kingdom. Since this Kingdom was not finally and definitively revealed in their life time, and yet the Spirit was an already present reality, they understood the gift of the Spirit as the first fruits of the Kingdom. The Spirit continues to act in the life of all disciples enabling us to see God in unexpected places, particularly the unexpected place of our own lives.

The presentation of the Spirit in the New Testament.¹

It's 5.15 at the Museum Station in the Melbourne Underground. Commuters stand around waiting. Some read newspapers, others chat, others simply stand bemused by the day's events. Then, a movement! An air of expectancy! Newspapers are folded, briefcases are picked up, the chatters move forward. With neither sound, nor sight of a train these commuters know the time has come. What is it that signals this moment? What causes such alert readiness?

The wind. As the train rushes towards the station it forces the air in the underground to move ahead of it. The first sign that the train is coming is that rush of wind. When you feel this wind on your face you know with certainty the train is on its way.

The Spirit – as experience.²

This image illustrates the New Testament theology of the Spirit. For the Spirit is our first experience of God. The Spirit is God in the present moment, the God who is with us now even as we await a further revelation in the future. Paul calls this experience of God, the God who is Spirit, the 'first fruits' - "*we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies*" (Rom.8:23). The Spirit is the first fruit, the first

sign of a harvest that is already ripening. A process has already started. We have an apricot tree at home. When that first fruit appears I know for certain that summer has begun.

Elsewhere Paul moves away from the metaphor of agriculture, to the metaphor of the market place, to speak of the Spirit as 'the down payment', the guarantee.

"God has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment" (2 Cor. 1:22).

"He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee" (2 Cor. 5:5).

In these days of Visa Cards and American Express we may have forgotten the time when we purchased goods on 'lay-by'. The whole point of this process was to give a guarantee that we would return to lay full claim to these goods. It was a promise sealed by the first transaction of money. The promise is not just verbal for the retailer is actually given something; the retailer has an initial experience of some money **now** that guarantees more in the future.

To fully grasp the meaning of these images we need to enter into the world view of that first Jewish Christian community.

The God of Israel was Lord of history. Through such experiences as the Exodus, the Kingship, the Prophets and the Exile, God had been revealed as one who acts in history. Israel's covenants were expressed in terms of this world – a promise of land, of children, of a Davidic line of Kings, of a Temple. The God who was author of life made promises and bestowed blessings within life. Such was Israel's early theology. But what happens when history holds out no hope? What can God do when the promises seem utterly impossible – when the land has been taken by enemies, when the King has been captured and God's Dwelling Place destroyed? This was the situation Israel experienced during the period of the Exile in Babylon (587-547 BCE). During this time a new theology began to emerge and a new concept of history.

If history appeared to end the Promises, if history was so dominated by Evil that God's sovereignty was denied, then surely God would end history. This is the vision of hope expressed in a mentality and a type of literature called 'Apocalyptic'. "Apocalyptic literature is crisis literature" (Reddish, 1995). The apocalyptic mentality was born in crisis and turned its hopes to the imminent end of history, the closure of this age,

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so that a new age could dawn where God's power could once more be manifest. With the end of this age the powers of evil would be defeated and God's desires would be accomplished. The passing of this age would entail a great final battle before God's reign could be fully established. We know from the excavations at Qumran and the writings in the Dead Sea Scrolls that during the life and ministry of Jesus, some within Israel believed this 'end-time' was imminent.

Among the signs that would indicate the 'end of time' are the rising of the dead for judgement and the outpouring of the Spirit. If we can, even in our imagination, take on this mentality, this sense of an impending 'end of the world', we may be able to grasp the wonder and exuberant joy of those first disciples. They had an experience. For them Easter was not a theology, it was first of all a bewildering surprise. That, which they may have hoped would happen at the end of time, was happening now, to them. Jesus, the one they saw brutally executed then buried, they experienced as Risen. One who was dead, was now alive. They found themselves to be alive with new gifts of prophecy, of healing, insight, tongues, preaching. Again I want to emphasise that before these events were recorded they were first experienced.

As a community shaped by the faith and writings of Israel they found in their traditions words to explain their experience. The Acts of the Apostles has Peter say to the crowd at Pentecost – *"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel : and in the last days it shall be, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh (Acts 2:16-17)*. In those years after Jesus' death, other groups and communities outside Jerusalem shared this same experience of the Spirit. It seems that this was such an obvious reality that these early groups saw themselves living at the close of the age and believed that any day the full manifestation of God's reign would arrive. They expected to be still alive for the 'Second Coming' of Christ in power (1 Thes. 4:15, 17); some even 'downed tools' and stopped working (2 Thes. 3:6-12).

Time passed. The 'Second Coming' was delayed. Living in this 'in between' time a theology was needed to explain the current experience of the Spirit. Paul used the images described above, images from the land and from the market place, to try to explain the current presence of God-with-us in Spirit, while awaiting the final coming of God. What we now have, is God's guarantee to us, God's initial down payment of a fuller presence still to come. The Spirit is God's presence with us now and the promise that more is on the way. The process has begun. The train is already in the underground. The Spirit we now experience is the first breath of God drawing close to us.

Living as we do on the edge of a third millennium we have lost this sense of the Spirit as

an experience. We have a long history of doctrinal statements, of theology, of words about the Spirit and we have domesticated God's Spirit beyond recognition. We have made the mighty Divine Breath that enlivens the 'earth-creature' in Genesis and the dry-bones of Ezekiel, into a peaceful dove and a dry dogma about processions within the Trinity. The power of God's Divine Pnuma is better expressed in Japanese where the Divine Wind is called the Kamikaze.

What was the experience of the Spirit in the lives of the men and women of Israel, the lives of Samuel, Deborah, of David, Jeremiah and Jesus? It was a Spirit that impelled them into mission. Luke says *"Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness"* (Lk. 4:1). Here Again I am not talking theory; I speak the language of human experience. The witness of the Scriptures is that men and women felt compelled to act, to speak, to challenge – when common sense would counsel – don't cause trouble, leave it alone, go with the flow. But these people could not. Something in their deepest core insisted they stand apart. This 'something', which drives people to risk everything, to be laughed at, ridiculed, ostracised, imprisoned and even killed – this 'something' the scriptures call the Spirit.

Look to your own lives. Why would anyone now take on the role of Religious Educator Coordinator/Teacher? You'd have to be crazy – or Spirit-filled. Around us the world cries out with contrary 'crowns and kingdoms'. Young people are commodities to be exploited by market forces or condemned to unemployment. Even our religious leaders can fail to understand the complexities and vulnerabilities of today's youth. Easy answers are sought by society and church and always the school is the forum for the solution or the cause of the problem. In such a climate who would want the task of educating and promoting faith? Who has the courage to stand with today's young people, to see beyond the 'Persian carpet' dyed hair and rings, to their deepest inner searching for meaning? Are there people now who can say with the prophet Isaiah – *"Here I am! Send me"* (Is. 6:8). If these words echo in your heart then you too can say – the Spirit of the Lord is upon me. *"For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love"* (2 Tim. 1:7).

The effect of the Spirit

Having spoken of the Spirit as an experience, I now turn to look at the effect of this experience in the lives of the first Christian community. The primary effect of the Spirit is that it allows the disciples of Jesus to see God in unexpected places. Jesus' execution on Calvary not only put an end to his life, but also ended the hopes and faith of his disciples. Whatever their fervour for Jesus' vision of God's reign, it vanished with the brutal reality of a Roman crucifixion. This is imaged starkly in Mark where at the moment of

arrest one disciple leaves everything to run away from Jesus, naked (Mk. 14:51). Even the experience of the empty Tomb and the witness of angelic messengers do not immediately change fear to faith. The women fled from the tomb and said nothing "because they were afraid" (Mk. 16:8). Matthew records the doubt that some disciples still had even after their encounter with the Risen One. "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him: but some doubted" (Matt. 28:16-17). The change from fear to faith is attributed to the Spirit and described with images of wind and fire in Luke's Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

The Spirit enabled these men and women to look back at Calvary, to remember, and to see that what looked like an execution was in fact a saving act of God. God was present at Calvary. It was the Spirit that guided the community to see in Jesus of Nazareth more than a charismatic teacher and healer, but to see in his actions the power of God's reign breaking into their lives. They began to understand that in Jesus we see what God is like when God becomes human. They began to see, as Jesus saw, that the Kingdom is like a shepherd looking for his lost sheep (Lk. 15:4), or a woman baking a batch of bread with a small pinch of leaven (Lk. 13:21,) or a fisherman sorting his catch (Matt. 13:48), or a merchant looking for a priceless pearl (Matt. 13:45), or a woman harassing a judge to get justice (Lk. 18:4-5). Indeed, the Spirit gave birth to Christian faith.

The Fourth Gospel lists the effects of the Spirit:

the Spirit will teach you (14:26),
will bring to your remembrance (14:26),
will bear witness (15:26),
will guide you (16:3).

Prior to the gift of the Spirit the disciples of Jesus had not understood his words. While they called Jesus 'Teacher', his words fell on rocky soil. It was the experience, and tutelage of the Spirit that enabled them to understand the events that they had participated in. The Spirit prompted them to remember, to bring together the words and events and find meaning. The outpouring of the Spirit bore witness that the life and death of Jesus were part of the *eschaton*, the last days. The violence they had witnessed was the final cosmic struggle between God and Satan. The Spirit opened their eyes to see God where they least expected – beside the lake, in the house of a Gentile woman, on a Roman cross, and in an empty tomb.

The Spirit still moves us today to see God in unexpected places. Here I take the risk of sharing a recent experience when the Spirit worked through memory and insight to lead me to a fresh discovery of God.

Two weeks ago I was teaching a first year group of students about 'tradition'. Before long

they became very critical of the Church's inability to change. I reflected with them that as human beings we all find it hard to change; we like things to remain as they are. I used as an example a time when I first entered religious life and was received in a traditional long black habit. I spoke of my delight in this, and my resistance to ideas that there may come a time when we no longer wore such a habit! A student then asked, "And did you think you were better than others when you wore that habit?" What a terrible question. I paused, then answered with shame – "Yes I did." Later the student spoke with me after class and commended my honesty in this reply. For her, this had been a real breakthrough moment when she felt she could trust my words. This brief confession of my pride raised my credibility with her. But as she spoke to me, I realised how easily I could have given a different reply. Even as I heard the impact this moment had on her, I became profoundly aware of my own fragility. This moment need not have happened. In this brief, encounter, in an almost throwaway line spoken without thought, there was a presence of God. As the student came to sense some truth, I came to a deeper knowledge of myself. The Spirit was present. "Do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Lk. 12:11-12). How many times have you, as teachers, been amazed at the impact you have had on students? Do you realise the significance you have had at times through just a brief word or gesture? These are the moments when God is present and it is the Spirit who stirs in our hearts to enable us to see this presence.

The Spirit of Divine Filiation.

This example leads to my final point. I have been saying that the Spirit enables us to see God in unexpected places, to find God where we least expect. The most unexpected place, the hardest place to see God is within our own hearts. We can more readily see God 'out there', the God in the life of a Mother Teresa, or Oscar Romero, but to see God when we look in a mirror – impossible. Yet this is the constant affirmation of the New Testament, an affirmation based on the experience of the Spirit. *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us* (Rom. 5:5). *Do you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you* (1 Cor. 3:16)? *Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God* (1 Cor. 6:19)?

The New Testament proclaims that Jesus' life, death and Resurrection has an effect on us. We are changed by these events that happened two thousand years ago. Jesus is not just a model for Christian behaviour. He is more than a good man who lived and taught a new set of values which we

can admire and try to live by. This was not simply a human drama, for Jesus was Emmanuel, God-with-us. In Jesus' moment of death and return to God, he bequeathed to us the Spirit which had animated his own life and was the essence of his intimacy with God. At this point theology struggles to find words to describe the relationship between God and Jesus. The New Testament speaks of this relationship using metaphors from family life – God is 'Abba', Father, and Jesus is Son. The intimacy between Jesus and God, the relationship that needs to be described as Sonship, is attributed to the Spirit. The Spirit overshadows Mary and so her child will be called 'the Son of God' (Lk. 1:35). When the Spirit descends on Jesus at his Baptism a voice from heaven proclaims, "*Thou art my beloved Son*" (Mk. 1:10-11).

Jesus' life and ministry is animated by the Spirit of Sonship, and when his life and ministry is completed, this same Spirit is passed on to the disciples, drawing them into Jesus' own loving relationship with God. The metaphor of family continues as we are drawn into divine filiation, we become sons and daughters of God. The gift of the Spirit and the Divine filiation the Spirit generates is most clearly described in the Gospel of John where there is a scene unique to the Fourth Gospel.

From the cross Jesus sees his mother and the beloved disciple and makes two announcements introduced by the prophetic 'Behold'. "*Woman, behold your son...behold your mother*" (Jn. 19:26-27). Jesus' proclamation is far more than that of a dying son making provision for the future care of his mother. It is a statement that brings the mission of Jesus to an end (v.28). Following this moment the gospel continues, "*After this, knowing that all was now finished ...*". This moment, these words bring the gospel to its completion. The entire life and ministry of Jesus in John's gospel has been moving towards this prophetic proclamation. What makes this moment the climax of the gospel? These two phrases – *behold your son, behold your mother*, establish a new relationship between the disciple and the mother of Jesus, and in so doing they establish a new relationship between the disciple and Jesus.

Most commentators emphasise the expansion of Mary's motherhood indicated by these words. But this is only possible if sonship is also expanded. If the woman always called 'the mother of Jesus' is presented also as the mother of the Beloved Disciple, then Jesus' sonship is extended to embrace others. This scene depicts the promise of divine filiation when believers, represented by the Beloved Disciple, will be incorporated, through the Spirit, into the sonship of Jesus. This Divine Filiation is the ultimate revelation of the 'hour' and concludes Jesus' mission. The disciples who believe are drawn into the loving relationship between Father and Son, as the Prologue to the Gospel states, "*But to all who received him, who*

believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:12; cf. 17:24, 26).

After Jesus' word of completion (*tetelestai*), he performs his final sovereign act as he bows his head and hands down (*paredoken*) upon the nascent Christian community the promised gift of the Spirit (v.30). The usual translation – *he bowed his head and gave up his spirit* – is not accurate and misses the whole point of this scene. The Greek phrase, *paredoken to pneuma* is frequently seen through a synoptic interpretative model. Jesus gives up his spirit, that is, his life. This is not what the Johannine text says. The term *paradidomi* is not a euphemism for death (Moloney, 1995), it refers to the handing on or bequest of something to a successor (Burge, 1987). Nor is the Spirit presented as a possession of Jesus – it is not 'his' spirit or 'my' spirit (cf. Lk. 23:46); it is **the** Spirit (*to pneuma*). From the cross Jesus gives down to the seminal Christian community the eschatological gift of the Spirit, drawing the believer into the family of God. A gift of the Spirit expected at the end of time has already entered human history.

I wish to stress again that the Spirit, and its effect in making the believer a son/daughter of God, was first of all an historical experience. What we have in the epistles and gospels is the later expression of years of pondering on the meaning of this experience. The first community knew themselves as children of God, able like Jesus to say 'Abba'. The Spirit – the loving intimacy between Jesus and the Father – burned within their own hearts. "*You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*" (Rom. 8:15-16). The language of the New Testament testifies to the historical reality of the Spirit.

I do not think we take the historicity of the Spirit seriously enough. We have no trouble with accepting the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth and our Christian faith enables us to speak of this event as an Incarnation – God in history, God enfleshed. The historicity of the coming of the Spirit into the human story is more elusive. John's Gospel describes this moment in the death/resurrection of Jesus (19:30; 20:22). Luke describes it more elaborately within the Jewish feast of Pentecost (Act 2:1-4). Can we begin to take seriously the historicity of the In-Spiri-ation, just as we have accepted the In-carn-ation? Both words speak of God with us. God with us in the individual humanity of Jesus of Nazareth; and now God with us in the humanity of all believers. Can we believe in ourselves as images of God's presence as readily as we believe in Jesus? Can we believe in ourselves as sons/daughters of God as readily as we believe in the sonship of Jesus?³ This is the faith of the New Testament – "*The Spirit of God dwells in you*" (Rom. 8:9). "*And because you are*

children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6).

And this experience continues. Generations of disciples have found within their own lives moments, however fleeting and subtle, when the breath of God has touched them. As teachers, surely we know this. On what other basis can we speak to young people except on the basis of our own experience? For our teaching to be credible the words of the epistle must be our words - "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you" (1 Jn. 1:3).

Do not be surprised though if you find the Spirit difficult to locate. Jesus describes it to Nicodemus as the wind, "which blows where it will" (Jn. 3:8). We do not see the wind; we may not even realise its presence until we notice its effects - the branches moving, the grass rustling, the softest touch on our faces. Like the wind, the Spirit does not draw attention to itself. Our attention is caught by the shadows of the leaves, or the sudden coolness, or the sailboat skimming the water. In a similar manner the Spirit directs our attention away from itself. The Spirit moves within us to bring to our awareness who we are, and who God is, to make us more alert to our true relationship with God, to know ourselves as beloved daughters and sons.

In this article I have shared my reflections on the New Testament's presentation of the Spirit. I named the Spirit as the first gift we experience, the guarantee of God's gracious promise to share life with us. I likened this to the wind in the underground that indicates the train is coming and is almost here. I presented the Spirit as the experience that enabled the disciples to see God in the life and death of Jesus, prompting their memory and insight, leading them to new understandings. Finally I described the Spirit as the loving relationship between Jesus and God, a relationship described as sonship. The New Testament

experience is that we too share this relationship. Like the first disciples we can find God in the unlikely place of our own lives. It is the Spirit who enables this discovery in the almost imperceptible movements within our own hearts. The Spirit stirs us to a growing consciousness of God's intimate love confirming our identity as daughters and sons of God.

1. This is the text of an address to the Melbourne Religious Education Coordinators, given during their Conference at Catholic Theological College Clayton, May 21, 1998.

2 Some helpful books for teachers on the Holy Spirit are: Brown, R. A. (1994). *A once and coming Spirit at Pentecost*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press; Haughey, J. (1976). *The conspiracy of God: The Holy Spirit in us*. Garden City: Image Books; Moltmann, J. (1997). *The source of Life: the Holy Spirit and the theology of life*. London: SCM.

3 Traditional theology maintains the distinction between the eternal uncreated sonship of Jesus and the created gift of divine filiation we have received by a free decision of grace.

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For a useful introduction to the apocalyptic influence on Christianity see N. Perrin & D. Duling (1982) *The New Testament: an introduction*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Parish Ministry

Call to parish ministry: Identity, challenges and spirituality of lay ministers, by Greg Dues and Barbara Walkley, Twenty-third Publications, 1996, 176pp.

The authors provide a practical overview of contemporary lay ministry. The book looks into the general field of ministry in the church, and its long association with clerical celibacy. It also examines the identity and spirituality of lay ministers, the challenge they face and models for ministry and scripture. Useful for developing an understanding of lay ministry in the Catholic church.

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