

Pentecost
May 31st 2020
Acts 2:1-21/John 20:3-13

Psalm 127 verse 1 says: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.” At Pentecost God provided the disciples with the power and the tools they needed to begin to build His house, His Church. And He continues to equip us today. However we can choose if you like to do it the easy way or the hard way. Some Christians choose to work very hard for the Kingdom of God, in their own strength and sadly they often labour in vain. Not that I am saying that labouring for the Kingdom of God in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit is necessarily easy per se (ask Paul, who was shipwrecked, imprisoned and beaten more than once), but it is easier and it is more fruitful.

As I said just a couple of weeks ago and I have said many times before. Every follower of Jesus has the Holy Spirit, and we see in our reading from John’s Gospel, Jesus breathing on the disciples and saying, receive the Holy Spirit and yet they were still instructed to wait and pray to be clothed from on high with a mighty infilling of the Holy Spirit, that was to change everything.

We celebrate Pentecost in the context of Easter – it is part of the same narrative. Jesus was raised from the dead, commissioned the disciples to tell the whole world near and far about God’s redeeming love and then ascended into Heaven to return to the Father and send the promised Holy Spirit. And the power of the Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead is the very same power, the same Spirit that is poured out on the disciples and if we want it, on us.

One of the most important things that the Spirit brings is unity. The point of the disciples speaking in all the different tongues of the people who were gathered in Jerusalem was of course so that each one would hear the good

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news, but it is likely that as well as their own language they would have spoken a common language, a form of Greek; almost everyone did. It was obviously a miraculous sign but it was also a powerful reversal of the incident of the Tower of Babel. Men had arrogantly striven to reach Heaven by building a tower and God scattered them and caused division amongst them, separating them by causing them to speak different languages. We still see people of different nationalities, races and languages unable to work together today. But Pentecost brought in a new era of unity in the Holy Spirit that transcends, racial, national and linguistic barriers. Nothing could have demonstrated more clearly than this the multi-racial, multi-national, multi-lingual nature of the Kingdom of Christ. The theologian John Scott also points out that, whilst at Babel men proudly tried to ascend to heaven, Jesus humbly descended to earth.

So the Spirit brings unity, but we still manage to resist and work against Him a lot of the time. Everyone is different, everyone experiences being filled with the Holy Spirit in different ways and everyone is given different gifts in order to build up the body. I spent a long time, wasted a long time in a lot of ways, seeking after an experience that I thought others had and I wanted instead of seeking God, recognising the work of the Holy Spirit in my life and using and developing the gifts He had already given me.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 says this:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

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Human beings, even Christians, seem to have endless ways of creating hierarchies, endless ways of comparing and ranking different gifts and abilities and sadly often looking down on others whom we deem to be less or differently gifted to us. The whole point is that we have different gifts and that we use them to bless and encourage each other. It does seem that people with different gifts sometimes find it hard to understand each other and to get on, but this really should not be the case and we need to identify these tendencies in ourselves and repent of them. Even those called in ministry together will sometimes struggle, Peter and Paul fell out as did Paul and Barnabas, it does sometimes seem as if Paul was a difficult character. Strong characters often are. I am sure this is why Jesus put so much emphasis on His command that we should love one another as He has loved us. As hard as it is, it is more important to be loving than to be right.

Thankfully the Church has overcome many of the divisions and suspicions that were prevalent back in the 60s and 70s when different denominations thought that members of other denominations weren't really Christians at all. And bizarrely some of that division was (and sadly still can be) to do with the language different churches use and their forms of worship. Whilst hopefully not many would question the faith of those who worship differently to themselves, people do sometimes believe that the way they prefer to worship makes them better Christians and somehow, we can all fall in to this trap so easily.

We need to be concerned with seeing the fruit of the Spirit in our own lives before we worry about how others are doing. It doesn't matter what gifts we have, or even whether we are using them for God if the fruit of the Spirit is not evident and growing in our lives. Paul makes no bones about it, if I have

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the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing!

If we desire to serve Jesus and to work for the Kingdom of God, we must pray and ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to be equipped and given the gifts we need. We are told quite clearly that we need to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit. We must work with the Spirit of God in us to mature and develop the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We must ask the question, are we more loving, peaceful, joyful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled than we were? Obviously we all have times when we stumble and fall, but overall the answer should be yes. It isn't a trick or a trap that God has set for us, but it is a challenge to live in love as He has commanded us to. In Acts we see many, many people coming to faith, through the proclamation of the Gospel, and through the witness of the common life of the Christians, who humbly loved and served each other. In Galatians Paul writes, "since we live by the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. We are all loved beyond measure by our Heavenly Father, we are all redeemed and saved by the love and sacrifice of Jesus, we all have the Holy Spirit of God living in us and we can all be filled, equipped and gifted by His Spirit.

Fear can keep us from advancing in faith and can also divide us. We all have different fears and insecurities. But despite these we also have hope to offer a hurting and bewildered world. And we must share that Good News effectively. So let us all seek to go on being filled and equipped by the Holy Spirit and to do everything in our power, in humility and gentleness to bear with one another in love and keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.