

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8: 14-17

09.06.10

Dear God!

It's the Day of Pentecost, often called 'the birthday of the church', when the Holy Spirit of God filled a group of troubled and confused followers of Jesus of Nazareth, lately crucified for pretensions to be the Messiah – and suddenly strange things are happening and ancient promises are being fulfilled. Suddenly those bewildered disciples are proclaiming to crowds in Jerusalem that the God who raised up Jesus of Nazareth is now breaking loose in the world. Physically Jesus is no longer present with his people as he was in his ministry among them but now he is present in a new and more powerful way – through his Holy Spirit. And that Holy Spirit is blowing like a wind to the ends of the earth. Suddenly people are experiencing God in a new way – everyone, men and women, young and old, slaves and free.

That Holy Spirit, however, is not just suddenly showing up here out of the blue. The Spirit has appeared before in the story the Bible tells, so we read of God's wind or breath or spirit in the Old Testament where the Hebrew word is *ruach* as of course the Old Testament is written in Hebrew language. And we first find that word in the creation story in Genesis 1 where we are presented with a picture of a formless, chaotic, deep over which there broods the *ruach*: the spirit or wind or breath of God. And gradually out of the chaos creation takes shape. And here is something else interesting. Listen to one theologian's description of *ruach*: '*ruach* creates space. It sets in motion. It leads out of narrow places into wide vistas, thus conferring life.' Did you get that? *Ruach* creates space, sets in motion and leads out of narrow places into wide vistas. So we might think of the people of Israel in the narrow confinement and cramped space of slavery in Egypt being released into the wide open space of the wilderness. Or we might even think of the disciples on the Day of Pentecost being cooped up in the house in Jerusalem and then being released out into the streets. Horizons are expanded, creating space. That's what the *ruach* of God does. Well – now just listen to this description of the Big Bang that scientists believe brought the universe into being: 'there is a theory called 'inflation' which describes how the cosmos grew over 13.7 billion years from a subatomic flicker into a vast expanse of stars and galaxies. It appears that the universe expanded rapidly... within the first trillionth of a second after its cataclysmic

birth...’ Is there not surely some connection there – between the Spirit who creates space, opening up wide vistas – and a universe that explodes into being, scattering energy and dust and matter into the void and creating space? Do we not see the Spirit’s fingerprints all over the Big Bang and a universe that continues to inflate and expand through countless light years? These are the cosmic horizons of the Spirit, the immense dimensions of the breath of the Creator God.

Then, continuing this creation theme, if we turn to the verses that introduced our service this morning from Psalm 104 we read that God’s Spirit is present wherever there is life. Speaking of all living creatures the psalm says,

...when you hide your face they are dismayed,
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to the dust.

When you send forth your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.

Here is God breathing the Spirit into God’s good creation, animating and giving breath to all creatures – until that breath is withdrawn, when they die. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of creation and of Life and we might take better care if creation if we saw things that way.

So that is the big picture: the Spirit at work in creation and in all living things. But then on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem look what happens: that Spirit, that *ruach* finds expression on people’s lips - as they find themselves proclaiming the Gospel, and people hear the message in their own tongues, their own languages. Here the spirit prompts words, utterance, proclamation. The Spirit inspires speech. And that leads us nicely to our other reading from the Letter to the Romans where the Spirit prompts words and utterance only of a very different kind. Hear again these words from Romans 8:

‘For you did not receive a spirit of slavery, to fall back into fear, but 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.’

Now, notice: here the Spirit who prompted the disciples to preach and to proclaim in the Day of Pentecost is prompting a cry that is wrung from the human breast, ‘Abba! Father!’ – a cry to God. That word ‘Abba’ means ‘Father’ in the language Jesus spoke, Aramaic, and it’s the familiar term with

which a child addressed their father. It combined intimacy and familiarity with respect. And the first and primary work of the Spirit of God within us is therefore to open up our spirits to God and to enable us to call out to God – ‘Abba!’, echoing our Lord. And by this we know we are children of God, says Paul, for we are in fact sharing in Jesus’ profound and intimate relationship with the One he called Abba. Now, of course, some may have problems with that word, ‘Abba’, not because it is a word from another language but because it’s a male word and we’re describing God in patriarchal terms, and many people do not wish to be reminded of their own fathers or indeed of men at all when they address God. So with some trepidation I am going to suggest a paraphrase for ‘Abba! Father’. I am going to suggest another way of putting it and I am going to propose the words, ‘dear God!’ So the Spirit prompts us to cry ‘dear God!’ and the word ‘dear’ speaks of the deep love and the intimacy that we share with God through Jesus, and the word God reminds us that we are dealing with God and therefore there is reverence and respect. And I would invite you this morning to consider when and where you might find yourself uttering those words ‘dear God!’. I am going to call them ‘dear God moments’ and I’m going to ask you where you might experience them, for they might be a clue to the workings of the Spirit.

Well, I would suggest to you that we might utter those words in two situations – either despair or joy. ‘Dear God!’ is either an exclamation of wonder and delight – or it is an expression of desolation. And in both these places we feel the promptings of the Spirit of God. Think of wonder and delight. Indeed return to our thoughts about the cosmos and its awesome mystery. So many scientists, believers and atheists alike, speak of the sense of awe and wonder which accompanies their discoveries. We peer down into the microscope or we gaze up to the heavens through our telescopes and we exclaim, ‘dear God!’ – only for the believer that is not merely a careless exclamation but it is a prayer, a moment of worship. And those words ‘dear God!’ might spring from us not only when confronted with beauty, the haunting beauty of the nebulae and the galaxies displayed above us, but also by the more immediate beauty of the earth around us. The experience of the sublime, the beautiful, provokes a ‘dear God!’ moment and that surely includes also human creativity, for art also has the power to evoke in us such moments, when our spirits are released and our hearts raised to the one who is the source of all beauty. Or we might think of laughter – moments of sheer joy when a

laugh becomes a burst of praise for it is directed beyond to the God who overrides fear and despair and death. And we might think too about our bodies, for the physical body is a site for ‘dear God!’ moments. I wonder if any of you recall the film ‘Chariots of Fire’ that came out a few years ago, about the athlete Eric Liddell who famously refused to run on a Sunday in the 1924 Olympics because of his Christian faith. And in that film a lovely line is put into his mouth when he says to his sister, ‘when I run I can feel his pleasure.’ There’s a ‘dear God’ moment arising from physical activity. So whenever our minds or our spirits or our bodies and our senses are engaged then there is the possibility of such ‘dear God!’ moments. When they happen heaven draws near and human experience is transfigured – and the Spirit bears witness that we are children of God.

But of course there are too those other ‘dear God’ moments that arise from anguish and despair. Think of those moments when you see some terrible tragedy on the news or in the paper or you share a sad encounter with someone and your heart just sinks and you have a ‘dear God!’ moment – ‘Dear God in heaven...!’ This is a kind of a groan. It’s a kind of a sigh and it comes from the heart and in fact such a ‘dear God!’ moment is a very pure form of prayer. It’s the Holy Spirit of God sensitizing us to the pain of creation and bringing it to expression as we sigh, ‘dear God!’ And if you want to encounter a blizzard of dear God moments you might visit the World Press Photo exhibition at the Nieuwe Kerk at the moment with its stunning depiction of scenes from all over the world in the past year. You cannot but be moved by these harrowing images of our world – ‘dear God!’ Here the Spirit of God mingles with our spirits, provoking the sigh, the groan - bearing witness that we are children of God. And sometimes of course it is our despair about our own lives that we uttering. Perhaps it is our own pain, our own despair that evokes the ‘dear God!’ Or perhaps it is a sense of our own sinfulness and failure and weakness. ‘Dear God - I am not the person I want to be!’ Well, let me tell you that such a moment is a sign of spiritual life, evidence of the Spirit at work deep within us.

This, then, is the Spirit of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit of God, poured out on all flesh in fulfillment of the promise on that Day of Pentecost. It’s the Spirit that birthed creation at the beginning; the Spirit that animates all living things. And it’s the Spirit that inspired the disciples’ proclamation on the streets of Jerusalem that people heard in their own tongues. And it’s the Spirit that prompts that cry from the heart: ‘Abba!

Father! Dear God!', reminding us above all that we are children of the living God. To whom be glory and praise forever, Amen.

Holy and loving God,
by whose Spirit you called all things into being,
and whose breath gives life to all living things,
and by whose power you raised Jesus from the dead
and transformed the disciples into witnesses,
we praise and bless you for the gift of your Holy Spirit.
Yours is the Spirit that undoes the grip of death,
yours is the Spirit that comes to troubled hearts and gives peace,
yours is the Spirit that makes us restless
for change in a world that has stalled,
for newness in a world grown old and tired.
On this Pentecost Sunday we praise and worship you,
thanking you for the gift of the Spirit.
O God forgive us that we quench this gift;
Forgive us that we become numb to the promptings of the Spirit,
Deaf to her still small voice,
Frightened and fearful when we should be joyful and free.
O Lord, forgive us and have mercy upon us we pray.

Come Holy Spirit and breath forgiveness over us.
Come Holy Spirit and give us your peace that the world cannot give.
Come Holy Spirit and raise us up and make us new,
And we pray in your power and in the name of Jesus Christ
Our Lord and Saviour, and in the words he taught us, saying...