

Acts 2:1 - 21

Psalm 104

Romans 8:14 - 17

John 14:8 – 17

All who are led by the Spirit are Children of God

In the 1970s Ronald Eyre from Lancaster University did a TV documentary called “The Long Search” which explored different faith traditions across the world. His examination of American Protestantism included a Pastor from an African American Church, which had grown from 25 to 1500 members and had a huge social program of community care. At one stage Ronald Eyre was interviewing the Pastor in his study where the wall behind him was covered with degrees, diplomas and other awards. At the centre of this galaxy of honours was a framed photograph. When asked, the Pastor explained it was his grandmother, who had been a slave set free, and was his inspiration. His childhood memory was of her standing in her kitchen and with straight back and gleam in her eye she would say: “I know I am a child of God.” There was something free, empowering and defiant in the statement. It represented what the African American slaves learned from the bible. Even in their suffering and degradation at the hands of white Protestants, they discovered God had claimed them. Integrated into their lives this belief gave them hope to endure and to overcome the slavery in which they lived. This gutsy statement had obviously led the Pastor a long way, and it expressed the deepest possible affirmation his Grandmother could receive.

Paul says: *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God*, and it is a similarly freeing and empowering statement. Paul does not mean that when the Spirit works the church becomes infantile, directing all its intelligence and energy to being childlike. And he is not aiming to predict or verify who is in the holy circle and who is not. Paul is making a distinction between those who live only for themselves and pay no attention to God, and those who confidently put their trust in God’s promise of life, made clear in Jesus Christ, which gives them hope against hope, even in the most enslaving and demeaning circumstances. The difference is radical and empowering.

Those who live only for themselves are driven by a power that has no greater context of hope for the future other than what they can conjure up. Such a life can only be based on fear, and is therefore death dealing and enslaving. Contrasted with this are those whom the Spirit frees to turn outwards and live on the promise of life, which is connected with a full and intimate recognition of God.

When Paul speaks about being empowered to call God Abba, “Father”, he is not being sexist. The term does not mean “bloke” – it means “intimate one” and in this context it means the one who brings the empowering promise of life. Paul says the Spirit does not call people to live for themselves. The Spirit calls people to live as children of God for the glory of God. That is, to live in a closer relationship to the power overall. This power, expressed in love that is willing to suffer, has been made available to us through Jesus Christ, who knew what it meant to pray “Abba”. For

Paul the very fact that a person comes to the deeper appreciation of God as “Abba” is a sign that the Spirit is working.

In Jesus’ absence the Holy Spirit energizes the disciples with a power they did not have in themselves. This power is not some vague, mysterious presence. As the beginning of the Acts reading today suggests, it is like a roaring wind that fills the house and leaves no doubt something is happening here. The notion of wind and Holy Spirit go together, because the Holy Spirit is the breathe of God, which like the wind comes and goes as it pleases, and will not be and *cannot be confined* by anything human. But the Spirit chooses to relate to what is human. There are two distinct realities, the human spirit and the Holy Spirit, and there is a relationship between them that is initiated from God’s side. It is by means of the human spirit that we come to understand, but no strategy we can develop will bring the Spirit unless God wills to send it, for the Spirit is a gift - unexpected, undeserved and free.

The work of the Spirit is to do two things. In the absence of Jesus God’s gift of the Spirit functions as a teacher to nurture the disciples and empower them to continue what Jesus did. It brings to mind of the work and words of Jesus. It enables us to learn of his resurrection life, the justice in which he lived, and the hope this brings for a life that is rich with promise. And by this means we learn that, in his being and his doing, he was and is one with God. A gift of the Spirit is to share the peace which passes understanding that Christ brings. This means nothing less than the certainty that we will have a future and a relationship with God. The sort of faith expressed by the African-American Pastor’s grandmother is just such a faith.

The second thing the Holy Spirit does is to challenge, prod, needle and cajole. It reminds the disciples that the people of God walk a different way from those who live only for themselves. It means they live with their minds set on God’s love for us, and the call to love one another as we have been loved in Christ. The Spirit forces the reality check; it keeps the disciples’ feet to the fire when they feel tempted to take a more comfortable path. That is why, as well as sharing the hope Christ brings, the disciples may also share his sufferings, for such is the lot of those who dare to go against the stream with Jesus.

Pentecost marks the end of the Easter season, but it is not a time of completion. It is a moment of birth, when the church of God moves forward into a life of mission. This is something we already know about because, over the past 7 weeks, we have been hearing the stories from the book of Acts. Repeatedly we have seen how the Spirit led the disciples to transcend the boundaries set by fear and ethnic and religious prejudice to declare the good news of Jesus to all sorts of people in many different places.

The scene in Acts is a truly inclusive moment. When the Spirit works no one is excluded, not even slaves. But people are not forced to receive the Spirit, for it does work by domination. It does not call us to be Lords, or Messiah’s. It calls us to be sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, and to relate to God as a beloved child, as he did. It means accepting that in Jesus Christ God has adopted us as God’s own. This is not infantile, it is deeply affirming of who we are. It also means that our vision is lifted to see that all people are worthy of being treated as heirs to the promises of God.

There is some connection between the celebration of this day and the fortieth anniversary of the Referendum to grant citizenship rights to Aboriginal people. And it is right we reflect on it here. For those who know they have received their Eternal citizenship from God, are bound to work for the true citizenship of all the peoples of earth. And the needling character of the Holy Spirit, which will keep us alert to the implications of the status gifted to us, will also prompt us to keep asking: *How does it go with the citizenship of the least in our land?* Are they able to rise to their full stature as children of God? Or are they held back by a spirit of slavery and oppression that arises from thwarted opportunities, the refusal to grant real equality, and the non-delivery on the hopes and promises of the decisions made 40 years ago?

Forty years on it is obvious there is a way to go, and not just for our Aboriginal people. But one meaning of this day is that those who have come close to Jesus will see that God truly does seek the renewal of the face of the earth, which includes human communities as well as the land and sea and air. Pentecost makes it clear that the world belongs to God, the earth and its entire people. And it is the divine will that all should inherit the gift of being children of God.