



The signs of the Spirit in our lives

by Mary Coloe

When you stand in an underground train station, the first sense you have of an approaching train is the wind as the train pushes the air in front of it. You cannot hear or see anything yet, but the wind announces the train is on its way.

I liken this to our experience of the Spirit. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for spirit is the same as 'wind' or 'breath'. Like the wind, we do not see or hear the Spirit, but we experience its effects:

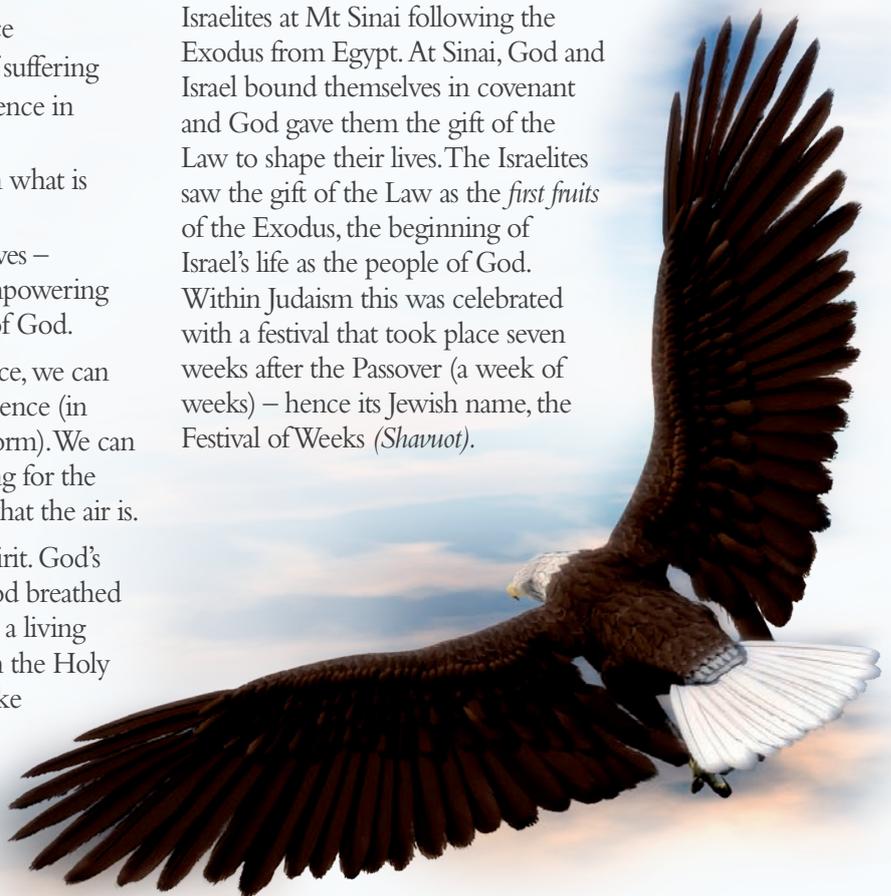
- the urge to respond to an issue of justice
- the move to compassion at the sight of suffering
- the ongoing, subtle sense of God's presence in our lives
- the ability to discern what is right from what is wrong.

These are the signs of the Spirit in our lives – prompting, encouraging, guiding and empowering us to live from Jesus' vision of the reign of God.

Because the Spirit is such a subtle presence, we can live our lives totally oblivious to her presence (in Hebrew, Spirit – ruah – is feminine in form). We can be like the fish swimming around looking for the ocean, or the soaring eagle wondering what the air is.

Our lives are utterly immersed in the Spirit. God's Holy Breath gave life to Adam when God breathed into the face of Adam who then became a living being (Gen 2:7). Similarly, we live within the Holy Breath of God. Hildegard of Bingen spoke of the Spirit as the One who vivifies all things, the one who is the "greenness" within.

The Feast of Pentecost began in Israel as a simple Harvest Festival to celebrate the first fruits of the crops at the beginning of summer. Later the festival came to be linked to the arrival of the Israelites at Mt Sinai following the Exodus from Egypt. At Sinai, God and Israel bound themselves in covenant and God gave them the gift of the Law to shape their lives. The Israelites saw the gift of the Law as the *first fruits* of the Exodus, the beginning of Israel's life as the people of God. Within Judaism this was celebrated with a festival that took place seven weeks after the Passover (a week of weeks) – hence its Jewish name, the Festival of Weeks (*Shavuot*).



Announcing a new Creation



Following the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians (who were at first all Jews) experienced the power of the Risen Jesus still present in their midst, restoring their faith in him and giving them the courage to proclaim Jesus as God's chosen one. Over a period of decades, the ongoing experience of the Spirit of Jesus enlivening the community led Luke to understand the Spirit as the 'first fruit' of Easter.

This led Christians to celebrate the Festival of Weeks no longer as the gift of the Law on Sinai but as the gift of the Spirit. Since this festival began fifty days after Passover (Easter), the name given to this Festival among Greek-speaking Jews and Christians was Pentecost. So Luke begins the Acts of the Apostles, with a vivid account of the Spirit coming to the Christian community during the great Jewish Festival of Pentecost.

In Luke's writing, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit provides continuity between the time of Israel, the time of Jesus and the time of the early Church. Israel's story begins in God's act of creation when God's Spirit hovers over the waters of chaos then God speaks, and the breath (spirit) of the Divine Word brings order out of Chaos:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was

moving over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light (Gen 1:1-3; RSV).

The same creative Spirit of God comes upon Jesus at the moment of his Baptism: in Luke, Jesus is still standing in the waters of the Jordan when the Spirit comes upon him. In this way, Luke presents a picture or icon of Jesus beginning a new creation as once again the Spirit and word of God breathe over the waters.

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased' (Luke 3:21-22)

This is Luke's way of announcing a new Creation beginning in the ministry of Jesus.

Then, at Pentecost, the same Spirit comes upon the community of Jesus' disciples, creating them as a new people of God. In the Spirit there is both newness and continuity, there is dynamism and growth. The disciples sorely needed the Spirit to guide them as they faced new issues, and expanded beyond the world of Judaism.

Some years after that first Pentecost, the small group of disciples was struggling. This group had its origins in Judaism, but within a few decades Paul had taken the message of the Gospel into the Gentile world in Asia Minor and Greece. Tensions and conflicts soon emerged.

There were concerns about who could be a Christian and who could not be. Some thought that all believers should come into Christianity through Judaism and accept male circumcision and the rigorous dietary laws of Judaism. This group wanted things to stay the same. Others, like Paul, determined that since the Spirit was being given to Gentiles as well as Jews, then clearly God was no longer making distinctions.

Paul considered that God's action in Jesus was a new creative activity so that in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female; you are all are one in Christ' (Gal 3:28). Guided by the Spirit,



Peter and Paul led the early community to understand both the radical newness of the Gospel of Jesus, where Gentiles were to be included. Yet this new act of God was still in continuity with the action of the Spirit through the prophets of Israel.

A new Pentecost

The year 2012 marked the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. John XXIII intended that the Council would bring about the

renewal of the Church and he spoke of opening the windows to allow in the breath of the Spirit to breathe new life into the Church. The phrase 'a new Pentecost' recalls the prayer John XXIII proposed for the Vatican Council's success: 'O Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost'. By invoking the image of Pentecost we get a glimpse into the hope John had for the Council.



“O Holy Spirit, renew your wonders...”

In the years since Vatican II, the Church has again found itself in need of the Spirit to enable us to be the Good News of Jesus in our world today. Since the Council, we have seen and felt the struggles between embracing the new vision and clinging to the old ways. This reminds me not only of the struggles in the early Church, but also of the conflict and confusion felt by the religious people of Jesus' time. To try and explain his radical break from their expectations, he told them a parable:

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins (Luke 5:37-38).

The newness of the Gospel simply will not fit within the old confines of Judaism. However, the parable concludes: *'And no one after drinking old wine desires new; for he says, "The old is good"' (Luke 5: 39).* Here I glimpse an insight into how difficult it is to change, to let go of old ways. Old wine does taste better: who would prefer new wine to aged wine? It is as if Jesus nods at his opponents and

acknowledges the difficulty of accepting the new vision that he offers.

At Confirmation we are reminded of the gifts the Spirit brings to help us in our Christian living –

- wisdom,
- understanding,
- wise judgement (counsel),
- knowledge,
- resilient faith (fortitude),
- religious sensitivity (piety) and
- wondrous awe at the presence of God in our lives (fear of the Lord).

The early Church needed all these gifts to survive the turbulent times of their age, just as we need these gifts in our times. Today, we could pray once again the prayer of John XXIII:

“O Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost.”



About the author

Mary Coloe, pbvm, BA., BTheol (hons), D. Theol. currently teaches at Yarra Theological Union, Melbourne. Her publications include numerous articles on the Gospel of John, Sundays under the Southern Cross: *Gospel reflections Years A, B and C* (Garratt Publishing)

God Dwells With Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel (Liturgical Press, 2001) and *Dwelling in the Household of God Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Liturgical Press, 2007).

Did you know?

- That in Greek the word for “wind” is the same as the word for “spirit” and “breath” – pneuma? The Japanese word “Kamikaze” actually means, the “Divine Wind.”
- That the medieval mystic Hildegard spoke of the Spirit as the “vivifier” – the one who brings “greenness” and life to all things?

Want to know more?

Try these titles from Garratt Publishing:

- *Sundays Under the Southern Cross Year B* Mary Coloe ISBN 9781920721237. It's also available for years A and C.

- *A Friendly Guide to Vatican II* Fr Max Vodola ISBN 9781921946301
- *Five Events that Made Christianity: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost* John Pritchard ISBN: 9780281078066
- *Mystery of Pentecost - Raniero Cantalamessa* ISBN: 9780814627242
- *A Friendly Guide to Prayer* Fr Michael Whelan ISBN 9781921946141

To order, visit www.garrattpublishing.com.au

© Garratt Publishing 2012