

The Hole Church

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:1-13; John 20:19-23

Pentecost is one of the great festivals of the church and it has been celebrated in many different ways in the 2 millennia since the Holy Spirit was first poured out in power on Jesus disciples in Jerusalem launching the mission of the Church to the whole world.

One of the more interesting ones for us perhaps is a tradition related to Cathedrals. In the Middle Ages Cathedrals were given an addition or perhaps better a subtraction of a small circular section of the roof which was known as the Holy Ghost Hole. This symbolised the coming of the Holy Spirit into the midst of the gathered Church. At Pentecost these would be decorated with flowers and a dove figure might be lowered into the Cathedral as story of Pentecost was read. I am reliably informed by Wikipedia that Canterbury Cathedral has one.

Now I am not going to suggest that such an architectural feature should be added to the ongoing restoration project, we have enough problems with the holes we have and it would be even harder to keep the building warm.

But as we look today at what the Apostle Paul says in 1Corinthians 12 about the role of the Holy Spirit we will be reminded of things that if they are absent there will be a big hole in the Cathedral, perhaps even two, but if they are present we will be a whole lot better at being Christ's people in the heart of Hobart.

ABOUT SPIRITUAL THINGS

Paul has been responding to questions that the Church in Corinth has put to him in a letter and the topic now changes to spiritual gifts, or perhaps even spiritual people, at the very least spiritual things. The Corinthians seem to have thought of themselves as supremely spiritual people with all sorts of what might be described as "happy, clappy" things going on.

They think of themselves as spiritual experts but Paul doesn't want them to be ignorant. He reminds them of their spiritual past where their spiritual exploration had not taken them to the living God but rather to mute idols. Things may be spiritual without being helpful.

At the heart of true Holy Spirituality Paul goes on to show is declaration that "Jesus is Lord". This is the one test. If you can say it you have the Holy Spirit, without it there is just a hole.

Application

What are we to make of this?

Oddity of the Christian Message

Firstly perhaps we might want to ask why it is only by the Holy Spirit that we can say "Jesus is Lord" it seems a simple test, we can say it and we don't feel very spiritual.

We perhaps need to remind ourselves how odd the Christian message is. A dead Jewish carpenter being the saviour of the world, which is how many people outside the faith would see it. It is only by the work of the Spirit that we can say in expanded form that this Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified is now, because of the resurrection, both Lord and Christ. This is why Cranmer put into the prayer book having said the Creed "The Lord be with you". It is only with God being with us by the Holy Spirit that we can affirm the truths of the Christian faith. To be a believer is to have the Holy Spirit, and it is only by having the Holy Spirit that we can be a believer.

It can be humbling to our pride and our intellect to grasp this but it also means that we can grasp the wonder that the Holy Spirit is at work in us.

A statement of defiance.

Secondly the Spirit not only brings us to understand who Jesus is, but gives us the faith and courage to say it. We need to remember that, for those to whom Paul was writing, this primitive creed that Jesus was Lord was a declaration that others were not Lord. The territorial spirits were not Lord, the ancestral gods were not Lord, most dangerously Caesar was not Lord. To say that Jesus is Lord was an act of defiance. It is hard to know exactly what Paul was getting at when he spoke of no one by the Holy Spirit says "Let Jesus be cursed" but it is well known that in later Roman persecutions this is exactly what those accused of being Christians were required to say to escape death.

For us with the prevailing anti religious or even atheistic mood of our society, with all manner of other claims for allegiance, the Lords of consumerism, the Lords of materialism we say Jesus is Lord. To our own passions, selfishness and intellect we say Jesus is Lord. This statement remains an act of defiance, and it is only by the Holy Spirit that we can say "Jesus is Lord" to the world and to ourselves.

Be discriminating

We too perhaps need to be reminded that we should be discriminating when it comes to spiritual things, not everything that is spiritual is good. Some things are obviously not good. A few years ago whilst walking down the road I saw signs for a coming visit by a psychic healer and medium, which I found distressing but as I passed the venue there was a sign across the poster that it had been cancelled due to ill health. All that is spiritual need not be good even if there is power there.

It can be harder to be discriminating when the spiritual comes wrapped in religious or even Christian trappings. The test however always remains the same. If it is of the Holy Spirit it will help people to live faithfully to the central declaration that Jesus is Lord.

The Whole Thing

But if "Jesus is Lord" is the whole thing about being spiritual then all those that can affirm "Jesus is Lord" are part of the whole thing. All Christians are part of a bigger whole and this is what Paul goes on to develop.

BOUNTY OF GIFTS

Variety but unity (4-6)

To the Corinthian Church, which seemed to be trying to perform spiritual one upmanship Paul says there are a variety of gifts, services and activities but there is one Spirit, one Lord and the one God, the kind of verse on which the doctrine of the Trinity is built, but that would be straying into next week's topic.

Paul's point is not doctrine but the pastoral point that as all these variety of things come from the same God then within this diversity there is also unity.

To each ... for the common good (7-13)

Furthermore the Spirit gives as he will to each believer not for their own aggrandizement or glory, but for the common good.

To each (8-11)

Paul emphasises the variety with a list of possible gifts. There are a number of places in the New Testament where there is such a list, and whilst this one may focus more on what we might call the spectacular other lists have the much more mundane gifts of administration and help. The point here is not so much the gifts as such but that they all are from the Spirit and they are given to all. There is no place for pride as all the gifts come from the same source (a point made 6 times in 7 verses).

The Spirit then is the giver, but it also clear he gives to all who call Jesus Lord, so each of us have gifts.

For the common good (12-13)

So the Holy Spirit gives gifts to the whole people of God but it is for the benefit of the whole. This is underlined by Paul returning to a favourite image of his, that of the

people of God as a body. But notice that he makes the image particularly pointed. We would expect v12 to read For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with the Church” But that is not how it ends, but rather “... so it is with Christ.”

The result is much more immediate and strong reminder that we are not just the body, we as the Church are the body of Christ. As we fulfil our role as God’s people, baptised in one Spirit, into one body we fulfil Christ’s role on earth.

Application

As we think through the implications of this let me firstly ask is this how you think of Church, as a body working together.

I suspect that many have a view of Church that is rather like a petrol station. You come in you get filled up, you may get a snack and then off you go. It makes no difference whether there are other cars there or not, you have what you want, they are not necessary. Unfortunately Anglican liturgy can reinforce this kind of mentality with people up the front doing things, and we even call what we do a service!

Now I love to see a full service station with many folk here, but we are much more like a choir, or an orchestra with each person playing their part. When someone is not playing their part the whole is diminished. For this passage clearly teaches that we all have a role to play.

Have you ever spent time thinking what gift God has given you? Have you ever prayed asking God to show you what the gift is that you have? They are not just natural talents or skills that we have, they may be but not necessarily, our natural talents and skills may not be something that we can easily use for the common good. Sometimes our natural talents maybe something that we use more for our own benefit than the benefit than others. It is also possible given the gifts mentioned in the passages that the gifts may be, for want of a better word, supernatural.

Our gift may be any contribution that we can bring that will build up the Christian community. The Spirit’s mission is to point people to Christ and so any gift of the Spirit will have the same ultimate end result, people being built up in Christ. But the important thing to realise is that God through his Spirit has given each of us a gift to allow his church to be what he wants.

And if we are not doing that there is hole. It is amazing how if only a small part of the body doesn’t work what an impact it can have. A few years ago I burnt my left thumb. I remember thinking at the time “Oh well it’s only my left thumb.” But it is amazing how many things you do with your left hand and how off putting it is to have any part of your body not working properly. To really work the whole has to be working. For us to really work as a Cathedral the whole body has to be doing its work as we build and support each other in Christ as Christ’s body.

Let us not be a Cathedral with a hole, a hole where Jesus should be, a hole where we should be taking up our part in the whole people of God. Rather let us be a holy people, knowing that the Holy Spirit is with us who whole heartedly serve and build up the body of Christ. That is the whole thing.