

Enlisted by the Spirit of Truth

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

Sermon for Pentecost, Year C, 5 June 2022

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Acts 2: 1-21; Psalm 104: 26-36; Romans 8: 14-17; John 14: 8-17

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

“This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (John 14: 17)

Friends, on this feast day of the Holy Spirit, this birthday of the Christian Church, we do well to reflect on what it means to be given the Spirit of truth. We're told that the world doesn't have a clue what this is about—the world, that is, meaning humanity whenever it turns away from God. But we Christians are supposed to know and to inhabit this new reality, this Spirit of truth. What is it that we've got ourselves into?

Well, it's the opposite of self-justifying arrogance and superiority for a start. If Christ is the truth, then the truth is gracious, welcoming, forgiving, inclusive and compassionate. These are the marks of God's Spirit that the world loses touch with. What the world prefers is the Spirit of lies, with competing groups making reality fit their preferred group narratives.

We see this spirit of lies in the supposed Christianity of Vladimir Putin, backed by his tame Moscow patriarch. Putin has accused the Ukrainians of Nazism, and now claims to be liberating the Donbas while shelling it into ruins. I'm reminded of a Vietnam era saying: that to liberate the village we had to destroy it. We see the same spirit of lies on the far right in God's own country, where religious ethno-nationalism clings to its creed, the second amendment, and to its sacraments, the handgun and the assault rifle. They're so keen to protect the unborn from abortion, and to save their children from hearing anything in school about race or LGBT, yet they won't lift a finger to protect their children from gun violence in schools. We see the spirit of lies at work when right-wing groupthink refuses the science of climate change, because belonging to their tribe of the like-minded matters more than the truth, and we see it when every right-wing crank claims to be a free speech warrior. Likewise, we see the spirit of lies at work on the radical left when woke cancel culture happily sacrifices reputations, while claiming to serve the cause of inclusion. All this is far from the Spirit of truth, of compassion, from the Spirit of Jesus, even though so many of today's top liars claim to follow Jesus, turning the Holy Lamb of God into an unrecognisable monster.

Instead, friends, the Spirit of truth is changing our preferred human narratives. In our Acts reading today we see an apocalyptic breakthrough being enacted, with a new agenda for human affairs revealed from God. It plays out as our accustomed world of divided languages and national antipathies yields to a new era of unity in diversity, as separated peoples come to understand one another thanks to the proclamation of Jesus Christ. This heralds an end to colonial era linguistic oppression, to ethno-nationalistic self-assertion, to the all-too-familiar status quo of division and rivalry. But this is so alarming that the text uses apocalyptic imagery for it—fire, and smoky mist at the symbolic level, gender-inclusive prophecy and a new status for slaves at the socio-political level.

Friends, this is what the Spirit does in the Church: humanity's business as usual is upset, its rusted-on habits are challenged, and people start to get ideas. For us the world changes. It's no

longer a hostile place ravaged by culture wars and actual wars, but instead the sane and rational home for all creatures that Psalm 104 imagines for us this morning—and don't we need that sort of ecological vision today, before it's too late? What's more, friends, we change, too, as Paul tells us in Romans today. The gift of the Spirit gives Christians a new sense of identity, of confident belonging to God, who draws near to us in love when we may only ever have known God as remote and disapproving. So, friends, the Holy Spirit enlists us in Christ's mission, but with that comes the empowerment we'll need, the clarity and confidence that comes with knowing God and knowing ourselves as children of God.

Today we take this stand together here in the Eucharist, gathered in the Holy Spirit, just like in our Acts reading this morning. Here we're summoned to an identity and a mission that the world can't comprehend and certainly won't welcome, because the Spirit of lies is so powerful, so pervasive, promising a rubbish identity to fearful people everywhere. But here in the Eucharist we celebrate a different Spirit; here we learn to speak a new language beyond humanity's defining divisions—the language of heaven. And this is what it says: Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.

The Lord be with you ...