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## Pentecost: The Inside and the Outside of Faith

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### ABSTRACT

This study offers an example of ‘standing theology’ as distinguished from sitting theology or kneeling theology. It was prepared as a sermon on Pentecost Sunday at St Mary’s, Wycliffe-on-Tees, Co. Durham where the primary reading was Acts 2: 1–21.

### KEYWORDS

Standing theology; preaching; Pentecost; Holy Spirit; wind; fire

Today, we celebrate the new cascade of God’s Spirit that marks the birthday of the Christian Church. It came on the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Formerly a harvest festival, this had become a celebration of God’s giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai, which was traditionally thought of as occurring 50 days after the Exodus from Egypt. And so, for Luke, the author of Acts, it is an appropriate time for God’s Spirit to be outpoured ‘upon all flesh,’ 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection.

We appear to have here two sets of contrasting theologies: religion as commandment and rules, over against religion as spirit; and a religion for the few – a chosen nation of tribes, over against a religion for all. However, many would say that these contrasts are both unfair to Judaism and unrealistic about Christianity; that such distinctions are rather too simple-minded.

But they are not simple-minded enough for me. So, I want to talk today about a rather more basic and obvious, a more ordinary, distinction within religions: one that is even more prominent in the theology of Pentecost. It is the difference between the inside and the outside of faith.

The word for ‘spirit,’ both in Hebrew and in Greek, can be translated both as a movement of air – a breeze or a wind – *outside* us; and as the breath, the vital principle, the life and even the spiritual centre that is *within* us. God’s Spirit is God active in creating and saving, in giving life and bestowing real life. The second verse of the Book of Genesis tells of ‘a wind from God’ that ‘swept over the face of the water.’ This is God’s mysterious presence and energy and power. It is this same violent wind that fills the house where the apostles expectantly wait at Pentecost. But God’s Spirit is also within. In another, yet more ancient story in Genesis (2: 7), the Lord God kneels in the dust and moulds Adam, ‘the man,’ from the earth, the ground – in Hebrew, from *adamah*. And God then ‘breathed into his nostrils, the breath of life,’ as the Jesus of St John’s Gospel much later breathed the Holy Spirit onto his apostles.

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This is the life that is given by God, our first gift, the essential gift: an *indwelling* energy and power and presence that is the image and likeness of God, God's resemblance. And, as such, it enables us to respond to God from within, as our spirit cries 'Abba, Father' to the Spirit, sighing our prayers to God, in concert with our groaning (Romans 8: 14–23). In this response, our breath mixes with and tastes the outside air; inhaling the hurricane; breathing into the winds of the Almighty. 'I will praise my God, while my breath remains', says the Psalmist (Psalm 104, v. 33a, at least in some translations). And in the same Psalm, he acknowledges that when God sends forth his Spirit all the creatures are created and when he takes away their breath they die (vv. 29–30).

Other images of the Spirit from scripture and tradition further illuminate these two poles of faith, of religion and of God. Fire is one particularly potent symbol. In the story of Pentecost, 'tongues, as of fire' come to rest on the bewildered followers of Jesus, as their hearts are ignited, and their speech inflamed. And at the very beginning of this new time of God's activity, Jesus sees the Spirit 'descending like a dove on him', as he rose gasping for air from his baptism in the river Jordan.

While wind and fire may serve as terrifying examples of uncontrollable power, the dove has always been an image of innocence and gentleness. Apparently, 'Dove' is today a favourite affectionate name given to daughters by Jewish parents in the East. (This is, presumably, because all little girls are harmless and wholly without guile. As you will know, unless you have actually met any.) But the image of the dove can also fit this inside/outside metaphor, for the dove seems vulnerable, and in its flapping about it models the heart and human spirit within us. Yet it can also represent the free soaring, airborne energy of God.

In his poem, *Little Gidding*, T. S. Eliot famously combined all three images in writing of 'the dove descending' that 'breaks the air with flame of incandescent terror'; and which can only redeem us 'from fire by fire.' This is all very powerful stuff, and it's hard to go beyond the poetry, metaphor and imagery of Pentecost and speak more plainly. But I'll give it a go.

Religion, faith and God are inside us, *of* us. But they are also outside us. And this has been so from the start, from our creation. 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord,' Saint Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, 'and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.' If it were not so, there would be nothing within us to answer to whatever lies without – outside our own, imperfect, subjective thoughts and feelings. But there *is* also Something Beyond Us, and, ultimately, beyond everything. It is the object of faith and the focus of religion. And that, of course, is the Great Mystery, the Mighty Wind that is God, to which we are related – to whom we are kin, breathing with his breath.

Religion is human. All too often it is all too human. Its value lies mainly in its being a response to something else: something infinitely greater. Our prayers, our worship and our lives are our actions, our strivings – but they are God's actions also. As *responses*, our creations must be thought of as God's creations, too. As we are.

Even the most secular artists and writers talk about their moments of inspiration. One of the meanings of the word 'inspire' is to 'inhale.' (And we're not just talking about wacky baccy here, even with artists.) Another is to 'fill with ability to do or feel' something. Inspiration is an inner, almost secret, certainly *intimate*, aspect of a person – like our breath. But its power and fullness can be expressed, so that it overflows into the outer world. We can only know an artist's or a writer's inspiration as it is exhaled

in creativity, beauty and truth. Art is *inside-out* stuff. And the same goes for the ‘inspiration’ of scripture and of the prophets. And for our faith, our worship and our praying. All of it, inside-out stuff.

Yet Pentecost seems to be about what we have, what we have received, as a gift ‘from above.’ As baptism is also. And Jesus, too. *The God without, coming within*. This is the *outside-in* of religion. However, that aspect of religion, that object of faith, is not our possession; for it is never under our human control or direction. It really is not ours, at all; not in that sense. And we must never pretend that it is. So, we must recall those images of the Something Beyond: the God-sized wind blowing up a tsunami of energy at the beginning of the cosmos, and then, billions of years later, crashing through the windows of the apostles’ little house to blow their lives upside down.

We shall never know much about this mysterious energy of God: where it comes from or where it is going. And certainly not what it will do next. But the breath that it has already bestowed on us, our breath of life within us, *our* spirit – the spluttering flame of the candle of our faith – that *is* ours. And it is our responsibility. For we do have some power over it – the power to quench it, anyway: to extinguish this little, guttering, spluttering flame, by putting the equivalent of a candle snuffer over it. We even have the power to use our God-given breath to blow out our God-given flame. And then, of course, if we really want to, we can sit down in the darkness once more, and curse our self-created night.

Or we can blow on the embers of our faith, our spirit, and open the shutters of our hearts and souls, and let this fire, and its light, shine out into the world. Letting the inside out, in this way, is the great commandment of Christianity. Exhaling *our* spirit to join with *the* Spirit, God’s Spirit; and in doing so, breathing out the sparks that have the power to set others aflame. Or if you prefer a gentler image: uncaging the dove within us, freeing it to soar into the wind, in a flight of freedom that may lift the hearts of many.

And that is exactly what we are called to do. Indeed, that is what we are *for*. Releasing our spirit, which is the manifestation and embodiment of God’s love, back into God’s world, where it alone has the power to change everything.

So, let us pray, this day, that we may have the desire, and receive the strength, to do just that. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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