The Spirit and Social Justice: Building the Reign of God

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This essay is an attempt to build our awareness of the justice dimensions of a life in the Holy Spirit through an examination of the biblical narratives. It is worth recalling that the Scriptures do not give us a straightforward understanding of the Spirit, rather they provide us with narratives and understandings that offer a set of manifestations and works of the Spirit of God. Our approach will be to examine a selection of passages from the New Testament writings, exploring them for their challenge to us to live out the reign of God.

We will be struck by the variety of ways the Spirit is at work in our midst, and the breadth of God’s vision for the kingdom. While it is the norm to be amazed at the unpredictable nature of the Spirit, that does not mean the workings of the divine are unable to provide us with sound foundations from which to build a just and godly world.

We open our explorations with the recreation of humanity through the Spirit, a point of departure which allows us to ask about the nature of the Spirit-filled reign of God. To do this we will concentrate on four passages: the Pentecost event as described in Acts (Acts 2:1-12), the baptismal saying found in Galatians (Gal 3:27-29), the image of the ekklesia as a body (1 Cor 12:12-30), and the healing and completion of sin-affected creation (Rom 8:18-24).

The Recreation of Humanity: Jn 20:22

The New Testament writings emphasise the recreation of humanity. While a conspicuous theme of Paul (New Adam and the Old Adam), it is captured most evocatively in the Gospel of John. After his death, Jesus, on the first day of the week, appears to his fear laden disciples. He offers them peace, and they themselves are overcome with joy. In a saying which echoes with the story of creation itself (Gen 2:7) the Risen One breathes on them, empowering them with the gift of the Spirit: After this he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven, for those whose sins you retain, they are retained (Jn 20:22). As Jesus, the crucified prophet, died he gave up his spirit (Jn 19:30). Now he offers the Spirit in abundance, recreating believers into a living kingdom of peace, joy, forgiveness and righteousness. This action of the resurrected Christ is absolutely fundamental to Christian dedication to justice. The recreation of humanity underpins the dignity of all human persons, and is a constant foundation of our hope, an essential attribute in the ongoing and often wearisome battle for justice. What, then, is the vision of the Spirit-filled reign of God that the New Testament writings invite us to respond to?

The Pentecost event rings with at once familiar yet ever exciting images of the Spirit. Its outpouring is accompanied by a sound like a wind, carrying forward the ancient imagery of the ruah of God. The tongues of fire conjure Old Testament stories of God’s appearance in our midst, most especially the revelation of God in the episode of the burning bush (Ex 3:1-6).

Commonly overlooked, however, are the connections between the kingdom and the Spirit attested to through the assembly of diverse peoples and their common hearing in their own language.

This group of nations, starting with the Parthians and extending to the Arabs, is neither descriptive of an actual gathering nor a random selection of geographical centres. Luke has modified an ancient list of the 12 major kingdoms (excluding Europe). The Jews who hear the first preaching of the new church are understood as representative of the entire Israelite people. The twelve tribes are replaced by the 12 traditional kingdoms of the earth. In turn they are addressed by the leader of the new ‘12’. Luke is signifying the advent of the New Israel, and the beginning of the new Age, the new era of the Spirit of God. The addition of the city of Rome is not just to complement the list with a city of some importance to Jewish historians and geographers. Rather it is a reference to the symbolic geography underlying Luke’s two volume narrative. In the Gospel, the Good News is taken from the outlying parts of Israel (Galilee) to Jerusalem, the city of the Temple and the heart of the covenant. From there it spreads to the utmost ends of the Jewish world, and thence to the centre of the entire known world, the imperial city of Rome. Acts concludes with the prisoner Paul, in Rome, preaching unhindered to all who came to visit him, Jews and non-Jews alike (Acts 28:30-31). From its first preaching, the Good News is addressed to the entire earth, to all towns, cities and kingdoms, from the greatest to the least. The work of the Spirit reminds us that the Gospel is not the possession or right of one people, however great their empire.

Furthermore, the beginnings of the Good News are not entrusted to the great, but to those on the margins. The birth of the reign of God is marked by unremarkable places (Galilee), modest people (the assortment who make up the first believers), and minor, subjugated countries (Israel). From the outset, the Spirit offers the Gospel to the centre through the periphery and to the powerful through the marginalized.

There are some trenchant reminders in this aspect of the narrative. In the eyes of God no one is unremarkable, something often lost upon us as in our eagerness for recognition and status. Further, if the Spirit is at work amongst the marginalised and the unimportant, then perhaps that is where we too are being directed to encounter the Spirit. If it is significant that it was the insignificant and the poor who were the key players in the Pentecost establishment of the reign of God. We are forced to ask whether we are willing to learn the lessons that only the poor can teach, lessons which will raise uncomfortable issues about how our world works.

On a second note, the new preaching has overcome the confusion of languages engendered in the story of Babel (Gen 11:1-11). There the single people with its single tongue was scattered, forming diverse nations with confusing speech, further isolated across the vast expanses of the face of the earth. In this view culture and language meant confusion and division. In the Pentecost event, not only does the Spirit bring the Word to all the nations, but does so respectful of their cultures and languages. The listeners are amazed that they hear the mighty works of God told them in their own tongues (Acts 2:12). They are able to ‘hear’ that Jesus is the prophet who sums up the hopes and promises of all peoples, without reducing the rich fabric of human culture to a single uniformity. Through the Spirit, creativity and unity are achieved within diversity and difference.

Here we are faced with a new paradigm of human existence. The Spirit does not iron out any differences between cultures, languages and customs. Rather, the church of God is a multi-faceted place, where the other, the foreign, the different all have a treasured place because to God they are riches to be used and preserved. If we are intent on bringing the reign of God to society at large then immediately we are set to question the deep racial intolerances that beset our world, and form a nasty underbelly in the Australian consciousness.

This Pentecost experience is not an isolated instance. Paul was not reluctant to unmask assumptions and inequalities based in culture, status, race, gender or language. He does so with a remarkable analysis of the meaning of that primary work of the Spirit, baptism.

In the midst of a sustained piece of polemic, Paul, writing to the Galatians, suddenly changes tack (Gal 3:27-29). He buttresses his discourse on faith and justification with a reference back to his readers’ own experience of baptism. He achieves this by quoting them a verse which appears to have its roots in the earliest baptismal liturgies of the nascent Christian communities. Because in Baptism Christians have been given life in the Spirit, then it follows that there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. All are now one in Christ (Gal 3:28).

The radical power of this text is not so accessible to us. Paul does not offer here an opinion from his own authority and witness. Rather, he calls up what was imprinted in the Galatians at the moment of their transformation and recreation. Baptism affected their social, cultural and religious standing. In the Christian assembly the newly baptised free citizen would be required to take his place alongside the slave woman. We can only imagine what this meant, since in this situation the societal roles were all topsy turvy. He would be the neophyte, the newcomer. She could well be the longstanding believer, mature in faith, wise in her leadership, strong in prayer. What a social revolution that meant. When the baptised assembled in Christ, differences by food, custom, language, residence, status, gender were simply unsustainable. Human distinctions were no longer relevant, and in fact were rendered effete. Before God, in Christ, they counted for nothing. They meant nothing to the Spirit who dispensed unimagined spiritual gifts according to divine patterns, not human assumptions.

One can not help but be reminded here of Moses’ prayer ‘if only the whole people of Yahweh were prophets, and Yahweh gave his Spirit to them all (Num 11:24-30)’. Or again, of that group in Acts, gathered in the upstairs room. There the Spirit descended on the eleven, the disciples of Jesus male and female, Mary and on Jesus’ relatives. In the Spirit distinctions between apostles, disciples, mother, cousin are made redundant. The breadth of the Kingdom, like the breath of God, works through and respects all cultures. It neither countenances divisions or distinctions, nor privileges any single language or race. There is nothing easy or simple about this. Much of the New Testament is taken up with the huge task of uncovering prejudices and false assumptions predicated on such things as gender, race and wealth, as evidenced by the divisions in the early community between the Jews and the Hellenists (Acts 6:1), the forgotten truth of Mary of Magdala as the first of the apostles (Jn 20:11-18), the behaviour of the wealthy to the poor during the eucharist at Corinth (1 Cor 11:17-22), and Paul’s plea for the slave Onesimus (Philemon 8-21). Our task is to uncover the current day distortions and seek an authentic and just social and church structure. At the same time, the justice and equality we work for inside the church should also spur us to work for those same values throughout society so that the reign of God, always bigger than the church, should be made manifest.

The Analogy of the Body: 1 Cor 12:12-30

The Galatians are not the only ones to have the power of their baptism recalled to them. When writing to the Corinthians Paul relates the unity of the Christian community to the liturgy of baptism.

> Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink.

What follows is Paul’s rendition of the ancient, classical analogy of the body, with its sense of the different gifts united in common purpose, integration and belonging. It is unlikely that Paul’s audience would have heard his version of this classic without their hearts racing and their excitement rising. Why is this?

In antiquity the analogy of the unity of the body had an immediate political context. It was employed during times of civil unrest when the patriarchal
and hierarchical structure of society was under pressure. Slave revolts, city
riots, and revolutionary nationalist movements provided grounds for
reasserting the ‘true’ order of society, and its beneficial results for all
classes and peoples. The body, that is the empire, was healthy, efficient
and content when all parts knew their place and worked in harmony with all
other sections. The analogy invoked and promoted the ‘natural’ inequality
between different groupings established by a society whose very premise
was hierarchy. The most important ‘member’ of the ‘body’ was the
‘stomach’. All other members worked for its welfare, all goods were
channelled to it, and all life and energy was directed from it. If the ‘hand’
or ‘eye’ failed to fulfill its role, and the stomach suffered, then all felt the
effects. In political terms, all suffered when social and civil unrest
undermined the status of the patricians, and interrupted the flow of goods
and benefits to them. Consequently, the steady trickle of favours outwards
from the rich to those under them was endangered by such ‘unnatural’
disturbances.

Paul’s reinterpretation would have had a startling effect on his hearers. He
sets all members on an equal footing, honouring the greatest and least.
Abolished is the conspicuous consumption and greed of the ‘stomach’,
along with its parsimonious distribution of benefits. Heightened is the
interrelationship of all parts. All are necessary, none can be dispensed with,
none can stand independently. Within the community the gifts, charisms
and ministries are for the upbuilding of the body, not the honour of the one
who holds them. After all are they not ultimately the work of the Spirit! And
again, within the assembly merits and distinctions based on wealth, social
status, education, family, age, gender, language and culture are irrelevant.
It is in the Spirit that one is baptized as a member. All are equally
unworthy of this calling. Nor does the Spirit recognize such artificial
distinguishing marks.

The Christian community, then, is the beginnings of the new human
community, the new creation restored and even more blessed. As the first
fruits of redemption, its example challenges all social, political and cultural
constructs. It announces that in God’s reign relationships are different. For
Paul, when we all drink of the one Spirit, we rewrite the ‘body’.

Creation, Recreation and the Fruits of the Spirit:
Rom 8:18-24

In the midst of his magisterial letter to the Romans, Paul relates the
recreation of humanity to the restoration of sin-wounded creation itself
(Rom 8:18-24). The glory of God is humanity, together with all creation,
living in freedom through the Spirit. The church, the community created in
the Spirit, is only the first fruits of this great act of completion and
fulfilment. It is the hope of things to come.

Yet this is one of the few New Testament passages, perhaps the only one,
which explicitly deals with the redemption of the creation itself. There is
something quite unfortunate about this. The Hebrew scriptures linked the
spirit to creation (Gen 1:2) as well as all the peoples of the earth,
especially Israel (Wis 1:1,6,7; Is 42:1-4). However, the focus of the
Christian writings is more narrow in that they tend to tie the Spirit to the
church as the locus of the new humanity. This has left Christians slow to
take up the implications of Paul as he writes of creation groaning in one
great act of giving birth. If the recreation of all things belongs to the fruits
of the Spirit, then we, the first fruits, need to ask questions about whether
we ‘enslaved’ creation, and covered its glory. In light of Romans, can we
ignore the state of our rivers? How can we repair the salination of our soils?
Are we preserving the Spirit given gifts of water, top soil and oceans?

Conclusion

To what does the Spirit call us? The New Testament texts focus on the new
human community begun at Pentecost and entered into at Baptism, while
also offering some sense of the rebirth of all creation. In the Spirit we are
the presence of Christ to our world. Are we willing to learn the social
implications of the Gospel from the poor, the refugees, the single parents,
the lonely, the aged, the sick? Are we willing to take these lessons to the
centres of power in our society and culture? Do we seek to be united
through Christ’s Spirit with those who are different from us? Do we prefer to allow stereotypes of gender, race, social status, language and custom to control how we relate?

The rushing-spirit of God hovers across the vast spaces and the many peoples of the ‘Great Southern Land of the Holy Spirit’. The breath of God challenges us to put in place, to put in our place, the breadth of God’s kingdom.

General References:

For the Holy Spirit


John


Romans


Acts of the Apostles


Galatians


1 Corinthians


Endnotes

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1. Unfortunately a choice had to be made whether to source the justice implications of the Spirit from both the Old and New Testaments or only from one of them, consequently our restriction to the New Testament materials. 


Refbacks

• There are currently no refbacks.