

Ghost no more

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 5 June 2022

A reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost C

Acts 2: 1-18; John 14: 8-17

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

This question shows my age, but do some of us remember when the Holy Spirit was typically known as ‘the Holy Ghost’? How words change. For ‘Holy Ghost’ used to be very traditional. ‘Ghost’ indeed derives from the Old English word *gast*. It means ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, and is the equivalent of the Latin word *spiritus*. Similar words are found in other Germanic influenced languages, such as *geest* in Dutch and *geist* in German (from which we also have the influential compound word *Zeitgeist*, meaning spirit of the time, or generation).

Today however, most people would relate the word ‘ghost’ to something that goes bump in the night, or something very insubstantial. So, in recent decades, Christians have made a shift from ‘Holy Ghost’ to ‘Holy Spirit’. In doing so, we have rediscovered much of what ‘Holy Ghost’ used to represent in centuries past, and have also encountered that mystery afresh. Yet do ghostly perspectives of the Holy Spirit still limit our own lives and understandings, and certainly many aspects of wider Christian Faith?

The ghostly nature of the Holy Spirit was certainly more than the word itself when I was growing up. Alongside the first person of the Holy Trinity, much was focused on the second person, particularly the humanity of Christ. Thereby, in more life-giving Christian spaces, we had, on the one hand, some deep understanding about the depth and mystery of God, and the ultimate, reliable foundation of God’s Love and grace. On the other hand, we also had, in Jesus the Christ, an inspirational model for living, and a rich symbol of the entwining of humanity and divinity.

Yet, apart from biblical references, and some sacramental occasions, the third person remained very hazy, ghostly. Rather than a rich Holy Trinity, conventional received Christian faith was therefore sometimes presented as a kind of Holy Binary, with a weird kind of add-on. This was pictured tellingly in a poster one of my friends at theological college used to love to display. Learn about the Holy Trinity, it said – ‘Big Daddy, Junior...and the Spook.’ Thankfully, we have moved on – I hope!

So what does the Holy Spirit mean to us, and to our world, today? That is a question we hope to explore, picture, and embody in the coming weeks. Like that first Pentecost, in what different languages, images, and expressions, will we give shape to the life of the Holy Spirit among us in our times, our *Zeitgeist*?

Our Gospel reading today speaks powerfully of God as loving, deeply mutual, as mysterious yet grounded, a transcendent yet embodied presence: past, present and yet to come. This is a long way from ‘the Holy Binary with a weird kind of add-on’ that Christian Faith might later become. For the Holy Spirit is at the heart of Christian experience. Without the Holy Spirit, Christian Faith loses not only its shape, but its soul.

It may maintain aspects of its outer form, but, without the Holy Spirit, Christian life begins to wane. Indeed, as and when it starts to die – intellectually, experientially, and socially – Christianity can increasingly then become a ghostly apparition, even a scary and disturbing one. I believe we can see features of that in Christian history, including a turning point in more recent times.

One of the major contemporary theological shifts has certainly been the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit, both positively (in general), and also negatively. Of course, the Holy Spirit has never been absent, but, after the first centuries of the Church’s development and formulation of doctrine, he/she/they has often been relegated to the margins, or regulated in officially, often highly controlled, rites and structures.

However, in the early years of the last century we saw the beginnings of what has become one of the most dynamic contemporary religious forces: Pentecostalism. From the 1960s and 1970s, Charismatic Christianity also emerged, not just in distinct new forms of Christian Faith, but within mainstream denominations. Meanwhile, together with Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity, though the relationship between the two is still contested, the simultaneous emergence of New Age spiritualities also created major shifts. Arguably too, recent Progressive forms of Christianity are part of this huge tectonic change in spiritual life.

Today, I suspect, many of us here are actually more comfortable talking about words like ‘spirit’ and key features of the third person of the Holy Trinity than some traditional aspects of the first two persons, though the humanity of Jesus still bulks large. Would that be right? Perhaps that is no bad thing, as a corrective to the ‘Big Daddy, Junior, and the Spook’ theology of the past.

Ecumenically speaking, that is also part of the gift of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians to *‘the one, holy, catholic and apostolic’* Church. They have predecessors of course, not least in the longer Holiness spiritual traditions, including vibrant aspects of Methodism in our own Uniting Church inheritance. Such concern for the Holy Spirit places vital and welcome emphasis on the value of spiritual experience at the heart of Faith. For, as John Wesley put it, this brings us such welcome ‘assurance’, as well as gifts of new life. It leads us into knowing God as alive today, right where we are, and not in some postponed life to come.

All of this however, as our Gospel reading makes clear, is to be understood and lived in the mystery of the Holy Trinity as a whole. If we over-emphasise the Holy Spirit in compensating for God as Holy Binary, we also have problems. We see this in aspects of Pentecostalism and Charismatic religion, don’t we? This often happens where particular spiritual experiences are exalted over reason, or where traditions are kicked aside rather than examined more deeply, or where certain parts or interpretations of scripture are highlighted whilst relegating the rest.

On occasions, I think there are some questions rightly to be posed to Progressive Christianity in that too. Instead, the celebration of the Holy Spirit is surely an invitation to rediscover and go more deeply as well as reconstitute Faith.

Today's Gospel reading shows the importance of the Holy Spirit in the very foundations of Christian Faith. Yes, this passage was probably written later than some other parts of the New Testament and is partly a reflection on the meaning of God in Jesus rather than a first hand recollection of Jesus' own words.

Full-blown doctrinal understandings of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity were yet to be evolved. Yet it also witnesses to how Trinitarian understandings were present in the first layers of early Christian understanding, picking up on features of the Hebrew Scriptures. For so many of the rich images and symbols of the Holy Spirit we celebrate this morning are drawn from, or associated with, stories and elements of the Hebrew traditions too, not least the feast of Pentecost itself.

God is dynamically alive – that is the shared message of both our Gospel reading, and the story of Pentecost in our reading from Acts. They proclaim that the Holy Spirit is not an afterthought. Nor is the Holy Spirit a ghostly reminder of what God once was, or the ghostly remains of the life and teaching of Jesus – something simply left to us to cling on to. God as Holy Trinity is not in that sense linear, one thing after another – first one person, then a second and finally the Spirit. God as Holy Trinity is eternally present and is mutually expressed in the creating, redeeming, sanctifying dance of divine diversity. This is the witness of Pentecost.

Do you know the song American Pie? The last verse ends like this:

'And the three men I admire most

The Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost

They caught the last train for the coast

The day the music died...'

Quite a bit of ink has been spilt interpreting those lines, and other enigmatic religious sounding references in that song. After all, say some Christians, the singer songwriter Don McLean was a Catholic, and was maybe leaving a veiled message about the loss of hope, as America, and the Western world, began to turn away from organised Christianity.

Others say the words are much more secular – though they disagree whether the three admired men, '*Father, Son and Holy Ghost*' might refer to

- a) Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens, the three amazing musicians killed in the plane crash to which the song as a whole refers; or
- b) three key assassinated political figures of the 1960s, John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert and Martin Luther King; or
- c) the three remaining members of Buddy Holly's backing band, the Crickets.

My guess is that the lines are deliberately ambiguous. They are not designed to give easy answers but to invite our own explorations and discovery of meaning. In that sense, like the richest presentations of both the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity, they encourage us to acknowledge the music of life – but with one big difference...

For it is possible to sing the Christian story like the song American Pie: as a lament, albeit an upbeat one, about the loss of life, music, and meaning. Like admiring Buddy Holly (as some of us do), we can similarly admire Jesus, and the legacy Jesus left.

Pentecost however sings a very different song – not as a lament but as a psalm of celebration, not as a remembrance of achievement but as an invitation to life, now and in the future. For the Holy Spirit is not a ghost, the ghost of Jesus, but the power of transformation for our lives and world right now, as in the beginning, and always.

Unlike American Pie, the music has not died, but is always renewed, whenever it shares in the life and song of the eternal God in Holy Trinity. Like Christians down the ages, we may need continually to rewrite the score, re-interpret and re-imagine the lyrics, and we may need to learn to sing in harmony, welcoming new and different voices, rather than demanding unison. However, the music of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit is always there for us. With, or without Buddy Holly, we can still ‘*know true love ways*’.

So what song will you, will we, sing afresh?

Which of the amazing Pentecost metaphors and symbols speak to us, today? Is it the fire, the wind, the tongues, the different nations, the wine, the dreams, or something quite else?

Pentecost invites us to sing, dance, speak them, by whatever language and tune feels natural. For our calling is not to treasure a ghost but to live more fully through the spirit within us.

It is like that story of the ancient desert monastic who went to his hermit teacher and said, ‘*Abba, I have kept all the religious practices and tried to live a Christian life. Yet I do not feel at peace or fully alive. What more can I do?*’

Then the hermit father stood up and spread out his hands to the heavens, and his fingers shone like ten flames of fire, and he said, ‘*if you will, you can become all flame.*’

Sometimes, you know, I feel that Christians settle for ghostly living, when the living Spirit calls us into flame.

To use the word of Sydney’s current outdoor festival of light, we are to be vivid - in the power of the God of true vitality who invites us into ever more vivid vitality. Amen.