Sermon for Pentecost Sunday Year A

Readings: Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21; John 7:37-39

i

Eldad and Medad failed to show up to Moses’ special meeting at the tent where Moses spoke with God. Yet they were given a share of God’s Spirit anyhow, much to the displeasure of Joshua, Moses’ deputy. What are we supposed to make of it all?

Some commentators assume that God asked Moses to assemble 70 elders (v16) and so Moses had deliberately omitted them from his invitation list, because they would have been numbers 71 and 72. Yet the number 72 would be more logical as it would mean 6 men from each of the 12 tribes and the wording: ‘they had remained in camp’ (v26) does not sound as if they had been purposefully omitted, but rather, had simply failed to show. They were also named men on the approved list of elders and so deserved their invitation and no point is made in the story as to why God would have wished two elders to be excluded.

Some suggest that Eldad and Medad’s spiritual blessing is indicative of the gift of the Spirit poured out on all flesh beyond the cultic leaders such as Moses dreams of in response to Joshua (v29) and which is in later generations prophesied by Joel and fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost – but the fact that these two men are officially part of the approved eldership rather weakens that argument.

Perhaps the best that can be made of it is to say that the story indicates that the Holy Spirit is God’s to bestow. Moses may have been the channel through whom God blessed the 70 elders, but God is not dependent upon Moses, and it is not for Joshua or Moses to determine who shall and who shall not receive God’s Spirit. Nor is such a gift dependent upon any cultic ritual, time or location.

As Jesus reminded the people many centuries later, the Spirit ‘blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8).

As Christians celebrate the great gift of the Spirit on Pentecost Sunday in churches across the globe, it is perhaps a useful reminder to us that we may be the recipients of such a wonder, but that does not mean we have controlling rights. The Spirit blows through the entire world. God touches the life of every human soul. Let us not become proprietorial about God, but rejoice that God’s Spirit ranges far and wide beyond our reach or control.

ii

The Christian revolution which Jesus brings to the Jewish tradition is clearly seen in the short passage we heard today from John 7:37-39. We are still talking about the same God as in the days of Moses. We are still talking about the same Spirit. Yet now, Jesus claims his place within this emerging Trinitarian picture.

We meet Jesus in this passage teaching in the temple precincts on the last day of the Feast of Sukkoth or Tabernacles. There are three main Jewish festivals: Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles and each in turn is reinterpreted by Jesus and Jesus himself becomes the new central player in each.

Passover, as we know, is transformed when Jesus becomes the ‘Lamb of God’. Sin has now been dealt with once and for all by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Pentecost will later be transformed too by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but which is crucially, the Spirit as promised by Jesus to those who believe in Jesus and now signifies the indwelling of the Father and the Son through the Spirit.

In John 7:37-39 we see how the third of these great Jewish festivals is being reinterpreted and once again Jesus takes the central role.

Part of the traditional prayers for this autumnal festival included prayers for winter rains and for winter sunlight. In this block of teaching, which commences in John 7:14 and ends in John 8:59, we hear Jesus claim to be the true source of eternal water and eternal light.

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him (John 7:37-38).

And:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12).

These claims are crazy. On what possible grounds could any sane man expect to be taken seriously? No wonder the people were stirred up. Some tried to kill him (John 7:19), others thought him to be mad (John 7:20), others that he must be the Messiah (John 7:31). It was the portion that believed his words that was ultimately the most significant. Countless millions have since found Jesus to be the light of the world and like a stream of living water within them.

The claims stand up because they are confirmed again and again in millions of lives in every subsequent age. But you have to take the leap of faith first.

If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own (John 7:17).

To preserve human freedom and human responsibility, the truth must remain hidden well enough for those who wish to reject it to be able to do so and yet accessible enough for the humblest soul who reaches out to God in faith.

iii

This very point is admirably illustrated in Luke’s account of the Day of Pentecost. Those who listen with open hearts and ears hear the gospel being proclaimed in many languages, whilst those who oppose the apostles hear only the sound of drunken babbling.

Luke is using his account to tell us that the gospel message is for all the world and will one day go to the ends of the earth. It is a message that can only be proclaimed in the power of the Spirit. Unless the Spirit opens up the mind to understand the mysteries, there can be no other conclusion than Jesus was a madman, as some in John 7 obviously concluded. Without the Spirit there is no faith, no understanding, no energy and no courage to spread the gospel and no ability to receive it.

In contrast to the Spirit that was given by Moses in Numbers 11, “all the people” were gathered together “in one place”. We must assume Luke means the entire 120 he mentions in Acts 1:15. The place where they met may have been the Upper Room. In Moses’ story, the Spirit was given to 72 men. In Luke’s story, the entire group: men and women, young and old, receive the gift. This fulfils the prophecy of Joel and the longing in Moses’ own heart (Numbers 11: 29).

What is also noticeable is that everyone is present now. The lack of faith Thomas suffered by being absent from the group on Easter Sunday is not to be repeated. The Spirit is for every member of the believing community. No one must miss out.

It is interesting that Luke tells us that the only thing the apostles did as they waited for the Spirit in Jerusalem after the ascension was to replace the traitorous Judas with Matthias.

Not only does this passage introduce us to two men who have constantly been part of the inner group for three years and yet have received no prior mention in Luke’s *Gospel* or in any of the other three, it also hints at a far wider group of followers and witnesses than the inner core of 12 disciples. It is important to replace Judas because their number is symbolic of the New Israel Jesus is founding in Judah.

The point of note today, however, lies in the fact that prior to the Spirit’s descent at Pentecost, they had to return to the old ways of choosing Matthias by drawing of lots. When the deacons are chosen in Acts 6, it is the spiritual giftedness of the men that determines the outcome. The message is clear: it will in future be only under the Spirit’s guidance that the Church perceives and fulfils its mission.

The inner life of the Holy Spirit is what we call the experiential side of Christian faith. It is the essential glue that holds everything together. Without God the creator and Christ the Redeemer, the Spirit would be without content; but without the Holy Spirit making God the Father and God the Son living realities within us, religion quickly turns into deadly formalism, and ultimately into dusty idols, before it crumbles into atheistic dust.

Pentecost celebrates the inner life-force of Christian faith. The Holy Spirit is the blood that courses through us to make religion a living spiritual encounter. The Holy Spirit is God at work, objectively unseen, yet powerfully felt and leaving a visible legacy of transformed lives and inspired people, not just within the Church, but wherever a human soul has been inspired by truth, righteousness and beauty.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**August 2016**