



The touch of God

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The imagery and language we use to express the presence and action of the Holy Spirit are always imperfect, often poetic and sometimes jarring. Teresa White FCJ surveys the different ways in which we communicate the gifts of the Spirit that descended at Pentecost.

The dramatic account in Acts describing the descent of the Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost takes us into the Upper Room, calls us to receive the Spirit ourselves. But the feast of Pentecost is only the beginning: the coming of the Spirit into our lives does not end on that day. More than twenty weeks of 'time after Pentecost' follow, and this long period reminds us that the Spirit continues 'to help us in our weakness'. 'For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly,' Paul tells us, 'the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words'. He endearingly adds, 'God, who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means ...' (Romans 8: 26).

On the last page of John V. Taylor's classic book about the Holy Spirit, *The Go-Between God* (first published by SCM Press in 1972) the author offers a poignant example of the wordless action of the Holy Spirit in human lives. It seems that the husband of a West Indian woman had died in a street accident in London, and when the police came to the woman's home to tell her what had happened, she simply could not take it in:

The shock of grief stunned her like a blow, she sank into a corner of the sofa and sat there rigid and unhearing. For a long time her terrible trance-like look continued to embarrass the family, friends and officials who came and went. Then the schoolteacher of one of her children, an Englishwoman, called and, seeing how things were, went and sat beside her. Without a word, she threw an arm round the tight shoulders, clasping them with her full strength. The white cheek was thrust hard against the brown. Then as the unrelenting pain seeped through to her the newcomer's tears began to flow, falling on their two hands linked in the woman's lap. For a long



time that is all that was happening. And then at last the West Indian woman started to sob. Still not a word was spoken and after a little while the visitor got up and went, leaving her contribution to help the family meet its immediate needs.

It is the Holy Spirit, Taylor says, who 'is the force in the straining muscles of an arm, the film of sweat between pressed cheeks, the mingled wetness on the backs of clasped hands'. The

Spirit's presence is 'as close and unobtrusive as that... and as irresistibly strong' (p. 243).

Church tradition summarises the countless gifts of the Holy Spirit, gifts of life and healing, hope, love and strength, in the biblical Seven, the digit that signifies completeness or limitless perfection. These gifts are divine promptings, not tangible and visible in the physical sense, but experienced, as in the above story, as a 'touch' of God. Through them, the Spirit mediates between the visible and the invisible (wisdom), between chaos and meaning (understanding), between time and eternity (right judgment), light and darkness (courage), the known and the unknown (knowledge), truth and illusion (trust), and between mystery and materiality (awe and wonder). As the 'finger of God's right hand', the Spirit points to the meaning behind events, stirs a sudden recognition of what is and what might be, helps us to articulate unspoken pleas and yearnings.

It is significant, I think, that in Christian liturgy, hymnody and art, images of the Spirit of God are frequently poetic: a ray of golden light; a fountain of living water; the dove, symbol of peace, the promise of God, giving understanding and inspiration. If, as [R.S. Thomas](#) puts it, 'Poetry is that/which arrives at the

intellect/by way of the heart', the poetic impulse conveys in words what music expresses in melody: the song of the Spirit. The Spirit is the breath of God hovering over the waters at the dawn of creation; the Spirit is *lumen cordium*, 'the light of hearts', consolation in the midst of tears, rest for those who labour. Even the recent English translation of the Eucharistic liturgy, which in general, with its insistence on a stricter adherence to the original Latin text, tends to be somewhat prosaic, reflects this preference for the poetic when referring to the Spirit. I am aware of this each time I hear the priest, just before the words of consecration, asking God to send the Spirit 'like the dewfall'...

The beautiful hymn, *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, expresses in serene poetic language the action of the Spirit: cleansing what is unclean, pouring water on what is dry, healing what is wounded, tenderly bending and moulding what has become inflexible, softening and melting what is chilled or frozen, rectifying mistakes and errors, guiding those who go astray. In a flash of intuition, a breath of inspiration, the Spirit imparts the ability to see a way forward in times of darkness and perplexity, to unite people who are at odds. Through the energy of love, the Spirit brings a heightened awareness of our world, God's world, in all its amazing variety and complexity, and of the place in it of the human person, that imponderable compound of both spirit and matter.

Yet images of the Spirit are not always gentle and peaceful, soothing and restful. The following version of *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, written by the Anglican priest, Francis Gerald Downing, and sung to a deliberately jarring arrangement of the original plainsong melody, emphasises that the role of the Spirit can sometimes be to disturb and to challenge, to awaken and to confront. As in Latin and Greek, Hebrew nouns are gendered, and since the word for spirit/wind, *ruach*, is feminine, the Spirit is addressed in verse 4 as 'Lady'.

Rage, Wisdom, and our lives inflame
so living never rests the same:
you are creative power and art
to blow our mind and wrack our heart.

As fiery gale, as storm of love,
discomfort, burn, all wrong remove,
exposing with your searing light
the lovelessness we keep from sight.

Disrupt and right our unjust ways
with the abrasion of your grace,
while we're your foes let no rest come
till to Christ's love you've brought us home.

You gust and burn through time and space,
and strange your beauty, fierce your face.
Disturb our sleep and break our peace;
till Christ's love win, don't, Lady, cease.

The presence of the Holy Spirit unites compassion and challenge, joy – the kind of joy that bubbles out in laughter, saving us from depressive seriousness in our efforts to know the unknowable – and an insatiable longing for justice. The Spirit unites visitations of grace and an unignorable silence, activity and contemplation.

In the traditional list of the gifts of the Spirit, the seventh used to be called 'fear of the Lord'. Today we usually refer to that gift as 'awe and wonder', a name that brings its meaning into clearer focus for us. A. J. Heschel, the great twentieth century Jewish mystic, describes it in these words: 'Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple, to feel in the rush of the passing, the stillness of the eternal' (*Man's Quest for God*). In common with wisdom, the gift of awe and wonder helps us to avoid the illusion that there is only time, not eternity; it prompts us to seek and to find God in all things.

We experience the touch of God in our lives as intermittent – it is real and undeniable, but also, like a physical touch, fleeting, transient. We may feel that touch in times of grief, as in the story above; in moments of unexpected attentiveness, when our minds are at peace and open to creative insight; or in times of questioning and bewilderment. The Spirit blows where it will, truly comes to us, but does not linger. The sudden encounter, the flash of inspiration or intuition, the connection made, these are signs that the Spirit has been with us, guiding us, enlightening us. All that is needed is our response: to allow the breath of the Spirit to transform us, to renew the face of the earth.

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