

Pentecost: The Holy Spirit in Myanmar

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, May 11, 2008.

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being. We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight. Amen.

We first hear about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, at the very beginning of creation, in the first chapter of Genesis. The King James Version puts it like this: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." When we say the Thanksgiving over the Water in the rite of Holy Baptism, we begin by remembering that the Holy Spirit moved over the water in the beginning of creation.

Last week, the waters on the face of the earth brought not life but death, and homelessness, and unimaginable loss to hundreds of thousands of people in Myanmar (Burma). Where was the Holy Spirit in *these* waters? Where is the Holy Spirit in Myanmar?

In our normal daily lives, we are familiar with thinking of the Holy Spirit as Comforter—God who sustains us with his presence, comforts us in our afflictions, and reassures us of God's love for us when we are down. When asked "When have you ever experienced the Holy Spirit in your life?" the stories we tell are stories about a warm, loving, consoling presence that we readily recognize as God abiding with us. "Once when I felt all alone," one person said, "and I went to the park just to walk around. And suddenly I felt God's Holy Spirit telling me, everything will be all right; just abide in me." This is the Holy Spirit that Jesus breathed onto his disciples when he came and said "Peace be with you." *The Holy Spirit that brings peace.*

We are also familiar with the Holy Spirit as the one who gives us the spiritual gifts that helps us do our part in proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ to the ends of the earth. These "gifts of the Spirit," as Paul so famously describes in our reading of Corinthians, are allotted to us (he says) "just as the Spirit chooses," so that we manifest a diversity of gifts and talents and skills that will enable us to spread the Gospel even as we are one body in Christ and drinking of one Spirit. When we are baptized, as we grow into this Spirit we begin to consider how our skills and interests can be used to enrich our own Christian life, or support the church community, or further the Kingdom of God in the world. You can see that incredibly wide variety of gifts at work here in this cathedral, in all of the ministries and groups and guilds and classes that offer opportunities to serve, or to learn, or simply to be a part of. *The Holy Spirit as gift.*

Finally, we are familiar with the Holy Spirit as God who effects transformation in our lives. Again, in baptism, we say that we are buried with Christ in his death, we share in his resurrection, and are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Just as God saw the crucifixion of his Son Jesus, and took this crucifixion and countered it with resurrection, so God the Holy Spirit sees all of *our* crucifixions, all of our deaths from sin and sorrow and counters them with forgiveness, freedom from the burdens of our bondage to sin, and the hope of eternal life. *The Holy Spirit as transformation, as life itself.*

But then we come to Myanmar. Where is the comfort? Where is the gift? Where is the life and the transformation in Myanmar? If we can't answer these questions, then our theology of the Holy Spirit become just glib words that last only as long as our good fortune lasts. The Holy Spirit becomes merely a fair-weather friend, a keeper of happy endings who always makes us feel better by patting us on our spiritual back and sending us out to live our lives in joy and peace. Where do you find resurrection and transformation when you have just lost your entire village? When you watched all 23 members of your immediate family get washed into the sea? When you look around and are surrounded by rotting corpses that just last week were your friends, family, and business acquaintances? When you see water everywhere but none of it can you drink? How can we talk about the Holy Spirit in Myanmar?

It is important to remember that natural disasters are not the will of God. Of course we know that God does not intentionally bring a deadly cyclone, say, to punish people. But we also need to be very careful not to be taken in by the more subtle form of this kind of thinking, which says that the disaster happened so that we have the opportunity to serve Christ by helping the victims. We live in a broken, imperfect, evolving world and natural disasters will happen. But if God can take a *human*-caused disaster that was the crucifixion of his Son and turn that to resurrection and salvation for us, then God will take a *natural* disaster that is the cyclone in Myanmar and offer life and hope. And I think that God offers this through the gifts of the Spirit that he gives to us, for spreading the Good News even in the midst of very bad news. So just as we cannot say that the cyclone is God's will, so we cannot say that after this week of death and destruction, God will provide and everything will be all right, unless by that we mean that we will be the agents by which God will provide for the victims, and we will do all that we can to help and not be passive sympathizers who deceive ourselves that prayer alone will make everything all right and there is nothing else that we need to do. As Dean Diamond wrote in the eTower last Friday, you may offer help to the victims in Myanmar through Episcopal Relief and Development. In your giving, you make manifest the gift of generosity and compassion given to you by the Holy Spirit.

As we keep the people of Myanmar in our prayers, let the Holy Spirit guide us so that in whatever we do to bring them from death to life again, our works may be a just reflection of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God-with-us. Let us be guided by the Holy Spirit to take these crucified peoples down from the cross and give them hope and resurrection. They need water—there is water everywhere but they need drinking water, and they need living water, the water of life that we would give to them by our material help. They need peace and comfort, they need rebirth, and they need hope in the midst of what looks like

hopelessnessô all these gifts of the Holy Spirit. And we need us to be the agents of the Holy Spirit in holding out these gifts. Give thanks this Pentecost for the coming of the Holy Spirit, that we may from this day go forth, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.
Amen.