

Of stories

Numbers 11:24-30

Acts 2:1-21

John 20:19-23

Today, Pentecost Sunday, is often regarded as the birthday of the church. And thinking of birthdays, I wonder if you know the story of Eeyore's birthday, from A A Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*?

Eeyore is a mournful grey donkey who dwells in solitude in the forest. Pooh Bear discovers that it is the day of Eeyore's birthday, and Pooh and Piglet decide that they must acknowledge this important event. They go to their respective dwellings to independently select presents. Pooh chooses a jar of honey – it is Pooh's favourite thing after all, so must be the perfect gift for Eeyore. Piglet gets a big red balloon, already inflated, left over from another party, to take to Eeyore.

On the way to Eeyore's place, Pooh (as he is inclined to do) becomes a little peckish and helps himself to some of the honey. Before he knows it, the whole pot is gone. As Piglet goes running to Eeyore's place, balloon clutched securely to his chest so that it won't blow away, he trips, and – BANG – the balloon is destroyed. In sadness Piglet arrives at Eeyore's place and presents him with a damp rubbery rag of ruined balloon.

In due course Pooh arrives with the empty honey jar, which he cheerfully describes as a Useful Pot.

We all have our stories of birthdays. We will also have our stories of the Church. And we will have our stories of our experience of the Holy Spirit.

In my case, my Holy Spirit story began at the age of three months when I was baptised – “Christened”, as it was then known. During that service the vicar, Mr Taylor, would have prayed a prayer beginning with these words

We yield thee hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy holy Spirit, to receive him for thine own child by baptism, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church.

I have no recollection of the event, of course. I assume I behaved myself!

I received the Holy Spirit's empowering when at the age of 13, as was the custom at the time, I was confirmed by Alan Johnston, then Bishop of Waikato and Archbishop of New Zealand. The archbishop placed his hands on my head and prayed

Defend, O Lord, this thy child, Stuart, with thy heavenly grace, that he may continue thine for ever; and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more, until he come unto thy everlasting kingdom. Amen.

I don't remember what I felt at the time. But as was the practice of the time I also received my first Communion at that service. When one of my godfathers asked me afterwards how I felt, I remarked on the strange feeling of warmth that filled me as I took Communion. I thought it sounded very spiritual. I suspect it might however have been the warming of the wine as it travelled down my gullet!

By the time I was away at university, some of the stalwarts of my home parish and good friends of my family were coming under the influence of the new teaching of the charismatic renewal, and were seeking something they called "baptism in the Holy Spirit". Some of them questioned the validity of their baptism as infants, and there were at times robust debates as they asked for baptism by immersion as a response to this new experience of God's infilling.

A couple of years later, a close family member went to live in Auckland and became involved in a Pentecostal kind of church there. In its statement of belief this church affirmed "We speak in tongues". The fact that this was not my relative's personal experience, and her questioning of it as a universal test of the quality of one's spiritual life – perhaps even a test of whether one was saved or not – led to bitter division between her and that church's leadership.

Within the Christian fellowship I led at university, similar conflicts would occasionally emerge, as some of the members did not conform to the expectations that others had of what a Spirit-filled life should look like.

In 1987, Christine and I arrived in Tawa. St Christopher's in Tawa was regarded as one of the leading lights of the charismatic renewal. Many of the songs were new to us; we were not really accustomed to hands raised in worship, nor ecstatic

utterances in languages we did not understand. It took us nine months of haphazard attendance before we felt comfortable enough to identify ourselves as possibly interested in membership.

Against this background it was therefore a huge step to agree to participate in a “Life in the Spirit” seminar after we’d been there about three years. It really was only trust that got us over our reservations – trust that had formed with friends from our home group who were also involved in the seminars. Given the hurt over my relative’s experience in relation to speaking in tongues, I felt a sense of healing and of God’s overwhelming grace and mercy when eventually I started, hesitantly, to speak in a language I did not know.

There is much more that could be said of my experience of God’s Holy Spirit: experience of healing; of a vision; of God’s leading into new directions and occupations and into taking risks for him; of conviction of sin; of discovering reserves of strength and wisdom I didn’t think I had; of awareness of growing character and compassion; and so on.

Some of these events came back to me on reading the account in Numbers 11 of the gathered elders being given a prophetic gift; a gift given for a particular moment in the story of the Israelites during their 40 years in the Sinai wilderness. Up until that point Moses had borne the burden of leadership of an ungrateful, grumbling people alone. And now God anoints with his Holy Spirit a group of seventy elders who will share in the leadership effort.

And there are two, Eldad and Medad, who, for reasons unexplained, are not at the appointed place at the appointed time. And when the Spirit falls on them too, someone reports the non-regulation activity to Moses, and Joshua demands that Moses stops them.

But you see, the Holy Spirit of God does not conform to human expectations and rules. The Holy Spirit works as he will, doing what is necessary to accomplish the purposes of God, giving the gifts that the people of God need for their particular context and situation.

One of the real challenges of our life together as Church is that we can take the good thing of the Spirit's work and institutionalise and fossilise it. The difficulty with the Church my relative encountered in Auckland is that they had institutionalised one particular manifestation of the Spirit's work: for them the gift of tongues became an expectation – maybe, even, a *rule*. A gentle gift given to help people draw nearer to God, and to express what is sometimes inexpressible, had perhaps become an ugly weapon of discrimination between people and a status symbol.

Things that are good and God-given can become problematic if seen for their own sakes and not as God intends. A salutary example of this is the bronze snake on the pole. We read in Numbers 21 how it was given for the healing of the people when bitten by snakes sent upon them. But if we read 2 Kings 18 we find the chilling news that by the time of King Hezekiah the bronze snake had to be destroyed because people were burning incense to it. Something given for healing in the particular context of a problem of snakes in the desert had become institutionalised into an object of worship, and had become idolatrous.

One of the challenges of our life together as Church is that we can take the good thing of the Spirit's work and institutionalise and fossilise it. And no part of the Church, no denomination, no style of worship, is immune from the problem.

We need to be asking always “what is the Holy Spirit of God doing among us”, “what is God saying to us”, and “what is our context and what is helpful within it?”.

Birthday celebrations are great times to be telling our stories. They are a way of honouring the one whose celebration it is. As we tell, and re-tell, our stories we help form our identity.

The same is true of families, and of communities, and of churches. The stories we tell are used to define us. They make us unique.

I look forward to getting to know your stories – individually, and especially the corporate story of St Peter's.

But the fact that our stories define us mean that we have to be reflective about the stories that we tell. We get to choose the stories we use, and the way we tell them.

We get to define the markers of our identity. And that means we can tell stories for good or ill.

One of the optional readings for today is from 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul talks about all manner of spiritual gifts. And it is apparent that part of the story going on within the Corinthian church was one of superiority arising from the exercise of some of the spiritual gifts. Paul will have none of it, however, for two reasons:

- First, because the Church is meant to be *one*:
“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink”. (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)
- And secondly, because the primary focus of the Spirit’s work is for the life, ministry and mission of the Church, the people of God who gather for worship and then disperse to serve Christ in the world. David Watson put it his way in his book on *Discipleship*, making reference to 1 Corinthians 12-14:

When spiritual gifts are exercised in an atmosphere of God’s love – Paul’s great chapter on love comes sandwiched between these two major chapters about gifts – they are always ‘for the common good’. This word in the Greek, *sumpheron*, means literally ‘for the bringing together’, ‘for the healing, restoring, renewing, strengthening’ of the body of Christ. Love controls the gifts. Love ensures that they are always used for edifying the body of Christ, never for self-display or for manipulation over others.¹

It would be easy for us to see the speck in the eye of other churches or traditions, but seems to me that self-display and manipulation are possible anywhere.

We tell our stories, these important markers of identity, but we need also to be prepared to have them redeemed and transformed, and perhaps transcended, in the power of the risen Christ. We tell our stories to be who we are; but should not tell them to present ourselves as superior to anybody else – because in Christ we are all one body.

¹ David Watson, *Discipleship*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1981, p.111.

It should be salutary to us that at the point at which the risen Jesus breathes on his disciples to receive the Holy Spirit, he commissions them to be sent into the world with the work of *forgiveness and reconciliation*.

Piglet arrived at Eeyore's with a burst balloon because he wanted to give his present to Eeyore before Pooh gave his present to Eeyore, because then it would look as if he had spontaneously remembered Eeyore's birthday without anyone having had to tell him. Piglet is concerned with status.

Pooh arrived at Eeyore's house with an empty pot because he let his love of honey get the better of him: his love of the *content* of the gift was greater than his concern for its *purpose*.

For too much of the history of the Church issues and debates around the Holy Spirit have been things that have, as it were, burst the balloon and emptied the pot; when instead the Holy Spirit was given to equip the Church to be the gift to the world that it is meant to be.

The story of Eeyore's birthday ends with Eeyore surprisingly delighted, putting the damp rag of balloon into the pot and pulling it out again, over and over. Yes, it is in some ways a happy ending; but in other ways it is pretty sad and pathetic, really, that he is satisfied with this when instead he could have been given a pot brimming with delicious sweet honey, and a big red floaty balloon. The risk is that the Church can become like this in itself and in its relationship to the world if it doesn't receive the Holy Spirit's gifts, cultivate the Spirit's fruit, and allow itself to be directed by the Holy Spirit into the things that matter to God.

Birthdays are a great time for stories. The gospel, the good news of God and Jesus, is a story into which we're invited to weave our own life story so that we become part of the fabric of God's work in the world. On this, the birthday of the Church, the challenge to us is to re-examine our story, and to be filled with the Spirit's power so

that we would help bring the presents of God's sweetness and abundance, and breath and joy, to an often gloomy, grey world.