

"NEEDED: GOD INTOXICATED MEN"

TEXT: "Don't give way to drunkenness....but let the Holy Spirit fill you" Ephesians 5: 18

INTRODUCTION

Today the Christian Church pauses to celebrate the Festival of Pentecost. Some may wonder: with the world so bent and bleeding, can we afford to celebrate this Festival of Pentecost? Perhaps a better question would be: can we afford not to celebrate it? For I think it's true that we court disaster when we focus only on our problems and forget the sources of our power.

It seems to me that Christians have an unfortunate way of either making too much or too little of the Holy Spirit which came to us on Pentecost. Sect type churches in the Pentecostal tradition tend to over-stress the Spirit. They down-play the cerebral and encourage the emotional in religious experience, prefer spontaneity to order, demand inner holiness of life, and ecstatically acclaim the charismatic gifts.

But rather than sit in judgment on those zealous Christians let us confess that for our part as conventional, standard-brand church members we are less aware of the Spirit - His gifts and power - than should be the case. It's as though we were afraid of the kindling power of the Spirit; as though we disdained enthusiasm or unbridled emotion of any kind in our religious experience. We know God as the Father over us. We know God as the Son for us and with us. But do we know God in us as the Holy Spirit?

DEVELOPMENT

St. Paul delivered a curious exhortation to the people of the Ephesian Church. Said he, "Do not give way to drunkenness....but let the Holy Spirit fill you".

Now this is a curious word because the apostle dared to suggest that being filled with the Spirit is the Christian counter-part to being drunk. The King James Version has it, "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess: but be filled with the Spirit". And I think we can be sure that "wine" here is the real thing - not Welch's grape juice like we use here on Communion Sunday, or kool-ade of some variety.

And curiously enough, this is not the only time that the Holy Spirit is associated with intoxication in the New Testament. You'll recall that on the day of Pentecost after people of diverse backgrounds had experienced the Spirit's renewal and empowerment, there were some at least who said, "these men are drunk". And Peter wasn't at all together flattering in his defense of the crowd. He didn't say that drunkenness was beneath them, that they couldn't get drunk or wouldn't. He said in their defense and in a matter of fact way: "They're not drunk. It's only nine o'clock". It was too early for that, according to Peter.

You and I know that mood alteration by drugs, soporifics and alcohol is very common in our society. Those over thirty prefer to get high on alcohol. It seems that some under thirty prefer to get high on pot or heroin or LSD. Perhaps if St. Paul were writing in our time he would be led to say, "Don't get high on alcohol. Don't get high on drugs. Try getting high on God. Be filled with the Holy Spirit".

What connection could there possibly be between the false elevation of excessive drinking and an experience of the Holy Spirit? Let's think about it.

FOR WARMTH AND CONVIVIALITY

For one thing, men drink for warmth and for conviviality. Gordon Cosby, founding pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D. C. tells of a time some twelve years ago when he was speaking as a guest minister during Lent in a church up in New England. The service apparently was very dull and uninspiring; the only things that seemed to be moving were the collection plates. When the service was over Dr. and Mrs. Cosby felt totally depressed at the absence of life in that church. They drove for a while before turning in for the night. The last room available to them in a wayside inn happened to be directly over the tavern of the inn. They didn't sleep much that night, but they were impressed by the laughter, by the sounds of happiness and joy, the comradery that came up from the floor beneath. Cosby was moved to say this:

"I realized that there was more warmth and fellowship in that tavern than there was in the church. If Jesus of Nazareth had his choice he would probably have come to the tavern rather than to the church we had visited earlier in the day."

All taverns aren't that cozy, nor all churches that cold and lifeless. The point is that God intended that through the Holy Spirit the church should provide for men and women the most satisfying and accepting fellowship anywhere under heaven.

To some degree I think our church here is fairly effective in this regard. Of course we can always do better. Remember that the church operates without a committee to pre-select members. There's no screening to insure that likes join likes. We do not gather in a church around anything as superficial as a hobby, like stamp collecting or flower-raising; or something neutral like music. The church dares to say: "Whosoever will may come!" Consider the opposites that the church enfolds: male and female, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, pensive and emotional, young and old, lettered and unlettered, black and white, yellow and brown.

Joseph Haroutunian was keen to insist that Christians should notice not only the Spirit working in them but among them - creating the kind of warmth and openness, oneness that so many in our time apparently feel can only be achieved by drugs or by alcohol.

Unfortunately for them when the drugs or the drinks wear off, there they are. I've heard people who frequent the cocktail circuit remark that the reason why they drink is because they really couldn't stand each other apart from alcohol....which may have truth in it. But here we are in the church, standing each other, if you will, maintaining remarkably durable friendships despite the differences of temperament, the issues of the city, the nation, the world that threaten to undo us. However exasperate a member of this church might be because of the happenings of the day, he can always come within the bonds of this fellowship and say, "Here, I belong". And this feeling is of the spirit - the Holy Spirit at work in our midst!

FOR JOY

Moreover, men turn to drink for joy. I do not consider myself to be a drinking man, but I do confess that I enjoy the atmosphere of most of the local hang-outs of our neighborhood. I enjoy the mirth, the laughter, the easy access of people to each other. Those who drink testify that alcohol relaxes their tensions, and gives the world a rosier hue and induces gladness in the heart. Unfortunately again, when the drink wears off the realities are still there. The problems do not vanish, and sometimes they multiply. And for every

moment of exhilaration there comes a compensating moment of depression. At bottom, the glass may be for some an escape. I think of the two hours I spent last Sunday afternoon talking on the telephone to a young man living on East 96th Street who was threatening to take his own life. Calls back and forth - then several to his wife in another apartment - finally 911 and the police. They made it in time and the man has spent this past week in Metropolitan Hospital. member of AA - in this chu

In contrast, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart is abiding joy. God is here - in control. This knowledge comes by faith and faith is engendered in the heart by the action of God's Holy Spirit. Feurbach was prone to describe faith as the mere projection of man's inner hopes and ideals into the outer reality of a transhuman God. The only thing we can say to Feurbach and others like him is that by the action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we know that we are the children of God and as such our lives are of great value to him.

It is the ministry of God's Holy Spirit to confirm the truth of who Jesus was and what He came to do in the hearts of men. To be sure, we sorrow with the sorrows of the world. We are caught up in its convulsions, its movements, its tragedies. But always with a sense of scale, for we believe that history whatever it includes is "that which happens between promise and fulfillment" - to quote the theologian. Our joy does not rise from the equilibrium of the nations; therefore, when that equilibrium is threatened our joy does not recede. The ground may shake, as it has in our time, beneath our feet, but always we can say with Moses of old, "The eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms". This is the answer of faith....engendered by the Holy Spirit.

One of the things that we Christians ought to be about these days as we mobilize to express our social and political concerns is to seek ways to express the joy that the world needs to experience. It bothers me that the church is associated in the minds of so many with gravity and gloominess. I sit through many prayers that ministers give as public occasions and conferences that so often convey a sense of the seriousness and the tragedy and heaviness of life. Surely it's possible for us to be seriously engaged in the issues of our day while at the same time testifying to the joy that is ours, that resides inside.

I've had in my file for some time now a copy of a prayer that was offered by Father John Hever of St. Joseph's Church, Belmont, Massachusetts, at a public banquet in the city of Boston. I imagine that the gathered guests were bracing for the usual funeral tones, prepared to endure a few moments of somberness before going on to enjoy themselves. Rather Hever must have surprised them when he prayed:

"Almighty God, our Father and our friend, we know that your memory of earthly banquet halls is pretty grim, ever since that first Christmas eve when an insolent fellow in a greasy apron at the only hotel in town slammed the door right in your mother's pleading face. Well, the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine, and here we are today, 20 centuries later, on a continent that the innkeeper never knew existed, speaking a language he never heard, and our very first thought before we sit down to our banquet tables is to stand in reverence and salute your undying name.

We are especially happy to make this prayer, good Lord, and we hope you are to hear it, because this time we are not in church and not in trouble.

As a rule when we speak to you, we are either kneeling against the background of a stained glass window, or buckling on a life preserver. It is either the routine of religion or the rush call for help. But today it is gloriously different. Today we want you to bless our joy as we stand poised for a few hours of genial festivity. Bless us then, O Lord, and grant that the food may we will flavored, the service smooth, and - if it isn't asking too much - the speeches short".

The fruit of the spirit is joy, said Paul. So let it be.

FOR STRENGTH Finally, men turn to drink for strength. They feel stronger after they have had a few. Bold enough to tell the mother-in-law to go home, courageous enough to go in and ask the boss for a raise, strong enough to ask the girl for a date, equipped for taking on the world.

I believe we have seriously misunderstood and left unappropriated the ability of the Holy Spirit to enlarge the powers of those who believe. I mentioned Gordon Cosby a few moments ago. Some of you may be aware that in his church there are rather steep requirements for membership, one of which is the reading of a considerable amount of semi-difficult literature. Dr. Cosby was once asked how he would possibly get ordinary, unlettered men and women from different walks of life to read the likes of James Pike and Paul Tillich and Emil Brunner. He said he believe that when Christians, honestly seeks to know, God expands their mental powers and gives them power and capacity to understand. And he's demonstrated this year after year in the membership of his church.

Most of us who would rise to testify to unanswered prayer would likely have to say that most of our prayers that have seemingly gone unanswered have been prayers for things, but is there one of us who has prayed unsuccessfully for the enlargement of patience, self-control, courage, poise, self-understanding. Wherever the Holy Spirit has taken possession of men, ordinary people have become capable of extraordinary achievement. Every once in a while - in the market place, in the bank, in the apartment building, in the church - one meets an individual who is living out this quality of life. And what impresses us about them is that their deeds stick, their words carry, their influence counts, and their lives convince.

Outsiders looking on at Pentecost long ago when the Spirit came were staggered by the bodlness of men who heretofore had been run of the mill. In a darkening hour, we should systematically and humbly ask that the gift of courage and perseverance might be increased in us.

CLOSING "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the spirit" said Paul to the Ephesians.

The times cry out for God intoxicated men and women. Of course there are times when we feel outmatched. Who doesn't. You may recall that in the last act of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, Wagner pits a lone harp against ten assorted woodwinds, the entire string section, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, and a tuba. We know how the harpist must feel when he is called upon to play against all that. But it is the business of God's Spirit to make us able for the day and to play brilliantly against opposing forces. But we live this side of Pentecost and because of this, a Christian may stand and say in confidence, "I belong. I believe. And I can!".

LET US PRAY

"Spirit of the living God, we open now our hearts to receive Thee anew.

Enlarge our expectations, deepen our sense of belonging, and renew our joy, to the end that we may shine as lights in a darkened world and make it easier for others to know that Thou art love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray"

Amen