

## "SPIRIT AND FORMS"

TEXT: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book....'"

Revelation 1: 10, 11

### INTRODUCTION

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the 50th day after Easter. Along with the Festival of the Nativity and the Festival of the Resurrection, Pentecost forms the third major annual celebration associated with the life of Christ. Centuries ago the practice was initiated to wear white garments on Pentecost Sunday. Hence, the day is also known, especially in Anglican and Lutheran circles, as Whitsunday, and the season as Whitsuntide.

We ought to make more of Pentecost than we do, for what happened on that first day of Pentecost has abiding significance for Christians in every time and place.

### SPIRIT AND FORMS

One question that Pentecost raises has to do with the relationship between spirit and forms. This is not an exclusively religious question. It comes into virtually every area of life: education, politics, art, music, to name but four. But for the Church it is a persistently urgent question, one that must be answered over and over again. How do spirit and forms relate?

The tendency in human affairs is to see spirit and forms as enemies, or at least as opposites. There is little doubt in my mind that if people were asked which they prefer, spirit would win hands down. And why not? Spirit suggests vitality, spontaneity, creativity, exuberance, enthusiasm, excitement, motion, life and freedom. I've often felt lifted and relaxed by the Coke commercial on television in which a host of freshly scrubbed youngsters are seen on one of Italy's lovely hills singing, without any encumbrances.

"I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony..."

And forms? Well, forms suggest order, sameness, predictability, ritual, routine, discipline, ceremony, standards, tradition, restraint, habit. I would go so far as to say that it is in the nature of things that spirit attracts and forms repel.

### NOT ENEMIES

But spirit and forms are not enemies. They are not even opposites. They are complementary realities that suffer when separated from each other.

To establish the point I should like to cite the experience of the beloved John on the Isle of Patmos. Just who this John was we do not know for sure. But that hardly matters. What we do know is that one who bore that name gave us the finest piece of apocalyptic writing that has ever come to humankind. We call it the Book of Revelation. It is the book with which our New Testament canon closes.

Notice how the vision came:

"I was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

John is telling us here that he was not on Patmos of his own volition. He was there as a punishment for fidelity to Christ. He had been banished. Exiled. The probability is that he was spared execution because of his advancing years.

Let's not romanticize Patmos. Let's not give it the Travel Agent treatment. Patmos was a small, scrubby, treeless island off the coast of Asia Minor, 60 miles southwest of Ephesus. It suffered from the inattention of Rome. It was a repository for the unwanted. Its Zip Code number was 00000 because Patmos stood on the edge of nowhere. A bit of a Rikers Island.

But Patmos is more than a physical location. Patmos is a state of mind. It stands for rejection. It is the place where we are forced to live when we know ourselves to be rejected by man and think ourselves to have been rejected by God. Patmos is that place where we are overcome with feelings of expendability, uselessness and self-pity.

Let Patmos represent those experiences in which we feel overpowered by circumstance; the times when we have tried to do the right and gotten into trouble for it; when we feel as though we are in a tag team match with the devil and his hosts; when we sense that we are on the shelf, put down, written off, cast out!

Patmos can be anywhere. It has no physical limits. There can be a Patmos on the island of Manhattan. There can be a Patmos in the wheatlands of Kansas or along the sun-drenched coast of Fla. or on some wind-swept promontory of Maine. Patmos can be a hospital bed. It can be a rocking chair in a nursing home. Patmos can be a lonely flat in some hi-rise tenement. Patmos can be a prison cell or a penthouse suite. In short, Patmos is anywhere that one feels used up and worthless, expendable and unneeded - after one has tried, so hard

#### HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN JOHN'S MASTERPIECE

Given such a setting how do you explain John's masterpiece. Why did he not give us a lament or a dirge? Why did he become apocalyptic? Well, he was not only on Patmos but he was also "in the spirit". Listen to him:

"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book.....!'"

His outer address was Patmos but his existential address was "in the spirit". That's where he lived. "In the spirit". And Spirit conquers place every time!

We ask, "what does it mean to be 'in the spirit'?" You know what it means. We can't diagram this play. Such an experience lies beyond the refinements of logic and language. But we know when we are "in the spirit" and when we are not. We are "in the spirit" when we are in tune with God's creative and redeeming love. When we are suffused with a sense of Divine Presence. When we are open to the powers of the world unseen. It is an inner state stemming from an awareness that one is forgiven and forgiving, that one is cleansed, that one is open, that one is receptive to truth, that one is ready to obey, to follow Christ.

There isn't much said nowadays about inner states. We are more concerned to alter outer circumstances. To a degree this is good. We would prefer to

clean up Patmos than to talk of spiritual alignment with God. But if one is "in the spirit", he or she can know the peace of heaven in hell.

Spirit conquers circumstance every time. So, Abraham builds an altar to God while the Canaanites are in the land. So, Isaiah sees God when Uzziah dies and the nation is plunged in grief. So, out of unlikely Nazareth a Messiah is raised up. So, Paul in a Roman jail writes his epistle of joy. So, Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer reach their loftiest perceptions of the gospel in dank German dungeons.

If one is "in the Spirit", he can find the living God in death row. If one is not "in the spirit", the stones and signs and symbols of even St. Peter's in Rome would be to no avail.

When I am "in the spirit", the Bible is alive. When I am "in the spirit", worship engages my entire being. When I am "in the spirit" my own frailties are clearer to my sight than my neighbor's faults. When I am "in the spirit", preaching is a problem of too much rather than too little.

Environment and faith influence our earthly life, but not to the same degree. Faith is by far the stronger of the two. The fact that he was "on Patmos" was relatively insignificant. The telling description is that John was "in the spirit", for the Spirit creates its own environment. Remember that!

HOW DID HE FIND HIMSELF "IN THE SPIRIT"?

But, you ask, "How did he manage to find himself "in the spirit"?"

Now it's a bit dangerous and presumptuous for a minister or a theologian or anyone to try to track down the trackless Holy Spirit. As the old hymn tune puts it: (We love trying to do it, however in order to justify our own biases and prejudices)

"His Spirit floweth free,  
High surging where it will....."

There's no classroom formula for it; But we have one telling clue. Listen to it. He was "on Patmos", "in the spirit" and "on the Lord's day". On the Lord's day! Here is where form enters the experience, for the Lord's day is an institution. It had a long, rich, suggestive history. Originally, as given in the law in Exodus 20, the Sabbath was to be observed because God rested when He finished the work of creation. When the command was given again in Deuteronomy 5, man was to desist from his labors in order that his servants might be given rest. The early Christians honored both Saturday and Sunday for awhile. Eventually they settled on the Lord's day in happy recollection of the resurrection of their Lord from the dead.

Century after century, you see, faithful Jewish fathers and mothers told their children, "we don't do that today. It's the Sabbath". And many, I'm sure, as in our time, replied, "why do you impose form on our spirits? Why do you institutionalize us?" But some of my Jewish brethren insist that the maintenance of the Sabbath over the years has been, humanly speaking, the very salvation of the Jew...the reason for its miraculous survival across 5,000 years.

In all likelihood there was no church on Patmos, not even a chapel. But the Lord's day, once remembered, can be celebrated anywhere. When that day came, John knew it. How he knew we cannot be sure. Maybe there was an old tree

on which he marked off the days. Exiled prisoners do not have calendars. But he knew. When that day came his mind went back to his congregation, probably one in Ephesus. And all the strength and vitality and unity and fellowship that he had known returned to bless him.

In my mind John's experience happened on a Sunday night after a day of breaking rocks in the prison quarry. He dragged his weary body back to a miserable hut and remembered. Remembered that sixty miles away his brothers and sisters were breaking bread and sharing the cup...offering prayers for his well-being.

Forms and institutions, structures and habits make possible the actions of the Spirit. They provide the framework in which the Spirit operates. Spirit and forms are not antithetical. They work together for our good. It is form and structure and institution that save us between our times of inspiration. It is form that keeps us from an over-reliance on feeling. Sure he felt remorse. How would you feel? But he remembered not just his feelings but the fact that in that worship yonder God's covenant of love was being celebrated...reaching. ~~It was a child of promise.~~ God had done something in history. He could trust his life to that. to include him even on the isle of Patmos.

#### FORM AND SPIRIT

On Patmos, in the Spirit, on the Lord's Day. Spirit and form need each other. You haven't outgrown the Church. You haven't outgrown the hymnal, or the Prayer Book, or the Commandments, or the Beatitudes, or the Lord's Prayer, or the Lord's Supper. Spirit and form need each other. Spirit uses form because we are bodies as well as souls...intellect and emotion. And form needs spirit because the latter kills and the spirit gives life.

I feel that each age needs to be rescued from an over-emphasis in one direction or the other. As I see it, our age needs to recover a respect for forms.

People tell us that we need a new Church, that we need new worship, that we need a new organization. Maybe what we need in the body of Christ is to be "in the spirit". It could well be a sign of spiritual malnutrition, if not disobedience, when we keep tampering with form instead of submitting to Spirit.

Remember that Pentecost happened because there was form. They were all together in one place making prayer - and the Spirit came and they were moved. It happened then. It can happen now. Here. In this place. In places like it. When people come together in prayer, "in the spirit", believing. "More belief and fewer beliefs is what we need" to quote the late Dean Pike.

"I was on the island called Patmos on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see...in a book.'"

I don't know what your Patmos is. I do know that this is the Lord's day and that if you are "in the spirit" something good could happen to you. Pray God it will!

#### PRAYER

Help us, dear God, to remember who and whose we are. Comfort and strengthen us through Thy Holy Spirit. And make us less a drain on other and more a blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

SPIRIT:

Vitality  
Spontaneity  
Creativity  
Excitement  
Exuberance  
Enthusiasm  
Motion  
Life  
Freedom

FORM:

Order  
Sameness  
Predictability  
Ritual  
Routine  
Discipline  
Ceremony  
Standards  
Tradition  
Restraint  
Habit

In the nature of things: spirit attracts and forms repel.

V S C E E E M L S

O S P  
R R  
D C  
H  
R S T

BILL SALEM

BEFORE

"The Scripture Reading for today is taken from the Book of Revelation, Chapter 1. Verses 4 - 11

It is found on page            in the Bible that is in the pews."                            1072

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After announcing the page number...pause for about 10 to 15 seconds...allowing people time to locate the scripture in the Bible. People do like to follow along with the reader.

Thanks...

AFTER

"Thus ended the reading taken from the Holy Scripture. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word and to our understanding of it.

Thanks be to God! Amen!

REMEMBER TO:

1. Go slowly...don't rush it...remember it's The Word of God...don't read it casually, and
2. Keep your voice up...smile...and remember that Ada Kinney has to hear you 'way in the back of the Church.