

THE SPIRIT AT WORK: PENTECOST SUNDAY B

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For this Pentecost Sunday let me tell you two true stories about how strongly the Holy Spirit works for good outcomes in human situations. One story is set in China, the other in Northern Ireland.

STORY 1. Today an elderly couple, both doctors, are living in a small town in the Szechuan Province in China. When they were young they studied together at the same medical school, fell in love, and got married. She was a Catholic, he was not. She wanted him to join the Church, but he did not want to get baptised. Soon they had a baby son.

Then the Cultural Revolution of Mao Tse Tung happened. The husband, together with many other men in the town, was arrested and sent to a labour camp. Hundreds of women lost their husbands, and hundreds of families broke up. The women were not even allowed to write to their man.

The separation was very hard on the wife. She had to work long hours at the hospital during the day and care for her son at night. As well as her loneliness she was under constant pressure from the government to divorce her husband and renounce her religion for financial benefits. She simply refused. Every night she and her son prayed to God for strength to endure.

Twelve years later, she heard one day that all the men were to be released from hard labour and allowed to come home. So she went anxiously with her son to meet the train, wondering how much her husband would have changed after his twelve long years in the prison camp. They arrived early at the station and sat down on the empty platform to wait. Time passed and she began to think she must have mixed up the day or the time because the entire railway station was empty even though the train was due very shortly. Then all of a sudden she heard its unmistakable sound as it drew closer and closer. But she and her son were still alone on the platform. The moment it stopped, doors started to open all along the track. She felt her mind racing and her heart beating within her.

Hundreds of men left the train, looking tired, weary and broken. Only one of them found the one he was looking for. The others had come back to a place that was no longer home. The wife later discovered that the other men had been divorced, abandoned and forgotten by their wives and children. She alone had kept the word she had given years before, her promise to be true and faithful no matter what. Her husband said later that at the moment he embraced her and their son he just knew he had to become a Christian.

Clearly the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth, love, courage and fidelity, had been with them all through those dark and dreary days! And now the Spirit of peace and joy was offering them a new life together in a changed political landscape.

STORY 2. Northern Ireland is a beautiful scenic place. But until recently it was a nation at war between two groups of people, Catholics and Protestants, divided along ethnic, social, cultural and religious lines. But after more than 40 plus years of violence, injury, pain and suffering, peace has come to places where people did not expect to see it happening in their lifetimes.

How and why has it happened? Because the Holy Spirit of God has been at work. There is a peace process which is the work of the Spirit. Slowly and tentatively – two steps forward and one step back – this process is gradually replacing what people there call *'the Troubles'* with the gift of community peace and personal peace.

It seems, looking back, that there was one decisive turning point when the cycle and spiral of violence came to a sudden stop. It was when a bomb exploded at Remembrance Day in the small town of Enniskillen (population about 10,000). Twenty-eight people were killed and many more injured. Among those killed was a young woman called Marie Wilson. It was her 21st birthday. Some birthday present!

An hour after the blast the BBC interviewed her father, Gordon Wilson, the Methodist minister of the town. The journalist asked him how he felt about the people who had just blown his daughter to bits on her birthday. Without a moment's hesitation Gordon answered: *'Of course I forgive them. I only hope that her Spirit may be with us and bring us to Peace.'*

The interview was played on the news that night. It was a moment that touched the nation. Since that moment of faith and forgiveness the momentum towards peace has changed the violent and tormented history of Northern Ireland for the better.

That too, I'm convinced, is the work of the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit that Jesus let loose among us on the first Pentecost Sunday, the Spirit which breathes where it wills, the Spirit that will never be snuffed out. That Spirit of God overcomes resistance and breaks down barriers. So we pray over and over again today and every day, *'Come Holy Spirit! Be for us the love of God at work, the love that "changes everything" and everyone!'*

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