28th May 2023 - Pentecost

Spirit

"I am the spirit of the morning sea,
I am the awakening and the glad surprise."
Richard Watson Gilder, *Ode*

Paul Tillich was a German/American Lutheran theologian who was one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century. He taught at a number of German universities before moving to the Unites States in 1933. There he taught at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School and the University of Chicago. Tillich is best known for his books, *Dynamics of Faith* from 1957 and his earlier work, *The Courage to Be.* This latter work had a great influence on me when I was studying theology in the early 1970s.

So on this Day of Pentecost, when the Christian Church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit, I return to *The Courage to Be*. And I find that I am drawn to reflect not on the Spirit being exclusive to the Church, but the importance of the spirit that is with and in us all. Tillich writes:

> *One of the unfortunate consequences of the intellectualization of man's spiritual life was that the word "spirit" was lost and replaced by mind or intellect, and that the element of vitality which is present in "spirit" was separated and interpreted as an independent biological force.*

"Spirit" isn't about mind or intellect. It's not all about an external force being given to anyone to make them rise up and do better. We say, "She's got great spirit, that one," as if that singles a person out as having a special ability. I'm not even sure I should be praying for the Holy Spirit to "descend" on me and make me different. But Tillich is suggesting that the "the spirit" is in us all. It is the essence of life, the God-presence already within us. Our life-long search, therefore, is to let that spirit make us fully alive, to have "the courage to be" fully what we were designed to be.

A bunch of ordinary, frightened, doubting people were changed at Pentecost, not by the imparting to them of a "separate, biological force", but because, individually and – quite remarkably – collectively they found that what they already had could make them into extraordinary people. With God's presence, they could be what they were meant to be. What an "awakening and glad surprise" *that* turned out to be on their "spirit day"!

A prayer for today

Alive to the Spirit? Or the spirit in me being more alive?
I'll take both on the Day of Pentecost, thank you. Amen

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