

Pentecost
Year A, 2026

Acts 1:1-11 Eph 1:17-23
Ps 47 Mt 28:16-20

Discerning and the Spirit

As we commemorate Pentecost today, we recall the wondrous coming of the Holy Spirit upon the world. It is the Spirit who, according to the promises of Jesus, “*will guide [the disciples] to all truth*” (Jn 16:13) and “*teach [them] everything*” (Jn 14:26).

In what is likely the very earliest writing of all the New Testament, St Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul ends that letter with a series of exhortations to the Christian disciples at Thessaloniki, exhortations that could rightly be understood as a blueprint for living according to the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth. He tells them:

We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all. See that no one returns evil for evil; rather, always seek what is good [both] for each other and for all. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. *Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good.* Refrain from every kind of evil (1 Th 5:14-22).

In another place, in his letter to the Ephesians (4:30-32), St Paul has further exhortations about life in the Spirit:

Do not grieve the holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption. All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

What kind of dissension and animosity, what spirit of anger and resentment must have been threatening those early Christian disciples at Ephesus for St Paul to write to them in such terms! *“Do not grieve the holy Spirit of God.”* Do not bring sorrow to God, but joy and gladness. Be kind, not bitter. Be compassionate, not disparaging. Hold on to what is good. Reject and deplore every kind of evil. This is life in the Holy Spirit of God.

In yet another place, in his letter to the Galatians (5:16-25), the Apostle Paul develops this teaching in greater detail, instructing the Galatians to *“live by the Spirit.”* To explain himself, Paul names the works of the flesh, which are to be avoided, since they are inimical to life in the Spirit of God. Several of these sinful works of the flesh are what we typically think of as sins of the flesh, sins of sensuality: *“[sexual] immorality, impurity, licentiousness ... drinking bouts, orgies, and the like,”* as St Paul names them. But there are other works of the flesh that he names that are equally sinful. They, too, are foreign to the Spirit of God, and belong the spirit of the world: *“idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy.”* His warning that *“those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”* applies

to all these evil works, not just those of a sensual nature. Then, Paul contrasts the works of the flesh, of the world, with the fruits of the Spirit, which are, *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,”* concluding that *“if we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit.”*

Now let's turn for a moment to another author in the New Testament, St John, to his first letter, where he, too, offers counsel about life in the Spirit (1 Jn 4). There, John contrasts the world and belonging to the world with the Spirit and belonging to God. He distinguishes the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit and tells his readers, *“Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*

Implicit in this warning is that *“false prophets,”* who claim to speak for God are causing error, confusion, division. So, we, the beloved, must not be gullible and uncritically accepting of every so-called prophet, teacher, or preacher. Rather, we must *“test the spirits to see whether they belong to God.”* And the criteria for this testing of spirits according to St John: acknowledging Jesus Christ and loving one another. We cannot hate another and love God. And if we love God, we must love one another. That is the test of belonging to the spirit of truth or the spirit of deceit, of belong to God or to the world.

So what do we learn when we consider these passages from scripture that speak about the Spirit of God? We see how both St Paul and St John distinguish between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world. Both, though in different ways and using slightly different terms, also distinguish the works of the Spirit and the works of the world. Both tell us that we must “test” all things in order to discover and discern whether they comport with God or whether they are aligned with the world. And in the end, we must choose to follow the Spirit, to belong to God, and not to allow ourselves to be led by the spirit of deception and falsehood.

Test all things, St Paul says. Test the thoughts of your mind. Test the desires of your heart. Test your actions and deeds. Test the words others speak. Test the deeds they do. Test the plans and proposals they make. Test their character, their intent, their consequences and results. Test your colleagues and neighbors and family members. Test your priests. Test your politicians and elected leaders.

What are the criteria by which I must exercise my obligation to test all things? There are three: Jesus Christ. Love. The fruits of the spirit.

How do I know whether something or someone is aligned with the Spirit of God or the spirit of the world? All I have to do is apply the criteria set out by St Paul and St John: Would Jesus do this, say this? Is this love and loving? Does it bring unity or division? Does it

bring peace or discord? Does it increase joy or sorrow? Does it heal or wound? Is it kind or cruel? Is it selfish or selfless? Is it harsh or gentle? Is this fidelity or betrayal?

Whatever or whomever I must test, I look to see if it or they are producing the fruits of the Spirit of God. If not, then I know that this is not of God. If what I see are the works of the flesh, then I know that I must turn away and follow the Spirit instead. If I must correct someone who has fallen into error, who has been caught in some transgression, then, according to St Paul, I must “*correct that one in a gentle spirit*” (Gal 6:1). But in the end, I may have to walk away, and perhaps even shake the dust off my feet in testimony against (Mk 6:11; Mt 10:14; Lk 9:5; 10:11) those whose words and works are contrary to the Holy Spirit.

We cannot have one foot in each domain, one in the kingdom of God and one in the world. We cannot serve two masters. This is the Spirit of truth speaking (Jn 16:13), and the One who has the words of everlasting life (Jn 6:68), and the Father, whose word is truth (Jn 17:17).

So this is how I test all things: by looking for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Do not be deceived; do not be led astray; do not be convinced by the evil spirit: where there is no fruit of the *Holy Spirit*, there is the spirit of the world.

There are some even today, false prophets, who view the unmistakable signs of the Holy Spirit, the fruits, as weakness and

folly. They claim to promote a muscular, militant, assertive, forceful version of Christianity. But they are ignorant of the scriptures, corrupted by greed and violence, partisans of division and cruelty. Look at their words and their actions and tell me if you can find some trace of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Where is the gentleness, the forbearance, the kindness, the selflessness, the goodness? Where these things are not, neither is the Spirit of God.

The world gleefully calls the wisdom of God foolishness and sees the life in Spirit as weakness. And yet, St Paul, that man of the Spirit, rightly observes that *“the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength”* (1 Cor 1:25).

Now we know how to test all things, and what the Spirit of God demands of us: fruits of holiness and righteousness. Let us understand well and discern well, and follow the Spirit so as to live in the Spirit. Amen.