

Homily – May 19th, 2024 – Pentecost Sunday



The Church's prayer for 2,000 years has been, "Come, Holy Spirit." The Spirit's answer in all that time has never changed, "I am here. I have always been here." This story

comes from an autobiographical novel by Bryce Courtenay called The Power of One. It reminds me of Pentecost.

It takes place in South Africa in the late 1930s. It starts off with an emphasis on a little boy who is 6 years old, and he is an English boy. His father has been killed by a rogue elephant. His mother, in response to this terrible tragedy, has had a nervous breakdown. She is put into some type of asylum. That leaves the boy alone, and he is being raised by a Zulu nanny on a farm that once belonged to his parents.

He is 6 years old, and it comes time for him to go to school. They send him to the only school that is available, but it is a school of all Boer boys. He is the only English boy in the school, and the Boers and the English hate each other with a passion. And when this small 6-year-old boy finds out that he is in a school with all Boer boys that automatically hate him, he develops a bed-wetting problem. Night after night he wets his bed, and the authorities pull the mattress out into

the sun every morning. And so, the older Boer boys quickly catch on that this little kid has a bed-wetting problem. So, they devise a kangaroo court. Night after night they drag him out. They tie rags around his eyes, they go through a mock trial, a verdict and a punishment. And since the punishment must fit the crime, they make him crouch down on the ground, and they urinate on him. This happens night after night after night.

Finally, there is a break in the school year. The boy goes home and falls into the arms of his Zulu nanny, and he cries, and he cries, and he cries, and he cries. He tells her about these terrible things that are happening to him in this school. And the Zulu nanny tells him, "Do not worry. We will solve this terrible problem of the night water. For I will send out the word, and the great medicine man Inkosi-Inkosikazi will come. And with one roll of the bones of an ox, he will cure you of this terrible problem of the night water."

Well, the boy waits patiently, and four days later there comes down the dirt road to the farm the largest black Buick the boy has ever seen. And out of the black Buick steps the oldest man the boy has ever seen. He is dressed only in a loin cloth with a rug under his arm. The farm hands have gathered around, and they are in silence as Inkosi-Inkosikazi moves to a tree and spreads his rug under the tree and sits upon it and looks around at the assembled silent farm hands and sees this small 6-year-old boy. "Come here!" Tentatively the boy comes forward. "Sit here!" The boy sits next to Inkosi-Inkosikazi on the mat. Then the medicine man looks up at the farm hands and say, "Bring me five chickens!"

They bring him five chickens. He grabs the first chicken up top the head, and he bends the chicken over, and he draws with the beak of the chicken a circle in the dirt. And then he takes the chicken, and he sticks the beak of the chicken in the middle of the circle with the rear end of the chicken in the air. The chicken falls dead asleep. Five time the great medicine man does this: five circles, five chickens, beaks in the ground, rear ends in the air...dead asleep! Inkosi-Inkosikazi goes back and sits on the mat. The farm hands are hushed in awe. The medicine man leans over to the boy and says, "You see these people here? They think this is magic. It is not. It is a trick, and I will show you how to do it."

Then he looked up at the farm hands, "Take these five chickens, kill them, pluck them, and cook them for we will eat them tonight." The ranch hands took the chickens leaving the medicine man alone with the boy on the mat. And the medicine man leaned over a second time and said, "Before I teach you the trick with the chickens, there is this unfortunate business of the night water."

Well, the boy's heart began to sink. But before it could sink too far, the medicine man said, "Close your eyes." The boy closed his eyes. The medicine man said, "You are on a ledge. It is night. The moon of Africa is bright. Below you, falls three waterfalls. The first waterfall plunges and surges into a pool, that pushes over that pool and plunges and surges down into a second pool, which pushes over that pool and plunges and surges down into a lake. On the lake are ten black rocks, and they lead to a beach of white sand. Do you see it?" The boy nodded that he saw it.

And the medicine man said, "Then, hear it!" And there rushed within the boy the sound of water—in his mind, in his heart, in his soul, in every fibre of his being. And outside him, alongside him, above him, beneath him, engulfing him was the sound of water. And in the middle of the sound—cool, calm, and confident—came the voice of Inkosi-Inkosikazi, "You are a young warrior. You stand on the ledge above the waterfalls of the night. You have just killed your first lion. You wear a skirt of lion tails. You are worthy to be in the honour guard of Shaka himself. Now here is what you must do, my little warrior. You must dive. And when you hit the first pool, you will go to the bottom, and coming up you will count 3-2-1. You will be swept over into the second pool, hit the bottom, and coming up you will count 3-2-1. You will be swept over into the lake. You will leap on the first black rock. You will count backwards 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 to the beach of white sand. Do you understand?" The boy nodded that he did.

And Inkosi-Inkosikazi said to him, "Then, my little warrior, dive!" And in the imagination of his heart, the boy left the ledge. He hit the first pool, 3-2-1, swept over into the second pool, 3-2-1, swept over into the lake, 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1, to the beach of white sand. And no sooner did he lay on the beach of white sand—with the sound of water rushing through him and around him—then the voice of Inkosi-Inkosikazi returned, "You have crossed the night water; there is nothing more to be feared. If ever you need me, come to the ledge above the waterfall of the night, and I will be there. Open your eyes!" The boy opened his eyes. The medicine man leaned down toward him and said, "Now, the trick with the chickens."

The story continues in the boy's own voice, now a man. "I went back to school. I never again wet my bed. But that didn't stop them. I was English, they were Boers. Night after night, they dragged me out, but they could never make me cry. And I knew this bothered them that they could never make me cry. For they had little brothers who were 6-years old, and they knew how easy it is to make a 6-year-old boy cry. But they could never make me cry. For when they tied the dirty strips of rags around my eyes, I would take three deep breaths, and there I would be on the ledge above the waterfalls of the night with the voice of Inkosi-Inkosikazi in my ears, 'You are a young warrior. You have just killed your first lion. You wear a skirt of lion tails. You are worthy to be in the honour guard of Shaka himself.' It was then that I knew that the outer me was a shell to be pushed and provoked. But inside was the real me where my tears joined the tears of all the oppressed, sad, and powerless people of the earth to form the three waterfalls of the night."

I love the ending of that story even though, for the boy, he continued to experience abuse at the hands of the older Boer boys. *"I went back to school. I never again wet my bed. But that didn't stop them. I was English, they were Boers."* Just because we have received the Holy Spirit doesn't make our lives easier. In fact, if we bear witness to Jesus, he has already forewarned us that life will probably get more difficult. Jesus doesn't appear in the Upper Room, wave a magic wand, and have the disciples fears and anxieties disappear. Instead, he inserts himself into that room, into their fear and anxiety, and breathes peace on them.

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~Fr. Phil