Sunday, May 26, 1985
THE HOLY SPIRIT OR SELF-DECEPTION?
Acts 2:1-13; Matthew 7:15-18

London during the first days of 1524, was a city awaiting its doom. Crowds of anxious people of every social stratum gathered to listen to the numerous astrologers and fortune tellers along bustling thoroughfares. All said the same thing: On February 1, the Thames would suddenly rise from its banks, engulf the entire city, and sweep away 10,000 homes. The vision was described in terrifying detail to increasingly larger crowds. It had started the preceding June, when a few soothsayers began to bandy about the prophecy, which quickly permeated their ranks. Month after month, the warnings were repeated with total assurance, and as time passed, they became accepted by most of the population, even though the Thames has always been the most docile of rivers.

At first, only a handful of families began to leave the city, but as the time grew near, people left in ever-increasing numbers. Long streams of laborers on foot, trailed by their wives and children, tramped the muddy roads to higher ground, 15 to 20 miles away. They were joined by their more prosperous neighbors whose horse-drawn carts were piled high with possessions. Nobles and clergy followed suit, fleeing to safe country estates. By the middle of January, over 20,000 people had left the city. London was rapidly becoming a ghost town. Electing to stay, the prior of Saint Bartholomew´s built a tower-like structure on Harrow-on-the-Hill and provisioned it for two months. He also acquired several boats manned by expert rowers — just in case. When the ill-fated day arrived, some braver souls stayed behind to watch, the soothsayers had predicted that the river would rise slowly, allowing those who could run fast enough to escape.

The hour finally came and, to the consternation of the watchers, nothing happened. The tide quietly ebbed and flowed and ebbed and flowed as it always had. An awareness slowly spread over the good people that they had been had. Still, to be safe, most stayed up that night and continued to watch. The next morning, with the Thames continuing to flow peacefully within its banks, the crowd, joined by the returning evacuees, was boiling with fury. Many shouted to throw the soothsayers into the river. Fortunately, the prophets were prepared. In a clever maneuver, seemingly not lost on present-day fortune tellers, they re-checked their calculations from the previous night and found a minute error. London was most certainly doomed, the stars were always undeniably right. But because of a minor oversight, the great flood would occur in 1624, not 1524.

The good townspeople could go home - at least for a while.

Religious history is filled with individuals and groups claiming to be speaking for God’s Spirit who have predicted exact dates for the end of the world, only to have the date pass and nothing happen and then, like the soothsayers in London in the 1500´s, say they miscalculated and picked another date.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Beware of false prophets - you will know them by their fruits.” Fortunately, in this case of the people of London, the fruits were evident immediately. Sometimes, however, large groups of people follow false prophets and leaders for years and only after a long time is it evident that they are false.

What makes us so vulnerable to self-deception, not only as part of a group or crowd, but as individuals as well? New studies by cognitive psychologists are revealing why individuals and whole societies find a compelling need to lie to themselves.

An example. The woman spoke about her father only after being reassured she would not be identified, because, in his time, the man had been famous. Even now, some 25 years after his death, the woman's voice was halting as she talked about her father's alcoholism and about how her family had somehow managed not to know how troubled he was.

"After my father died, we would find bottles of liquor hidden around the house, behind books, in the back of closets, and, looking back, I can remember how poppa was always 'taking a nap,' as my mother would say. Sometimes he would get very loud and angry with my mother and push her around. She´d tell my little sister and me that he was 'in a mood' and without another word, she´d take us by the hand outdoors for a walk."

"He was an alcoholic, but somehow I stayed oblivious to it all. Once, after I was grown and married myself, I got up the nerve to ask my mother about it all. She denied it out-and-out." To this day, this woman's mother has refused to admit the truth about her husband's drinking.

Family therapists have described this sort of denial and cover-up as "The game of happy family." It's just another aspect of the larger phenomenon of human self-deception.

In fact, the new research reveals a natural bent toward self-deception so great that there is a strong need for counterbalancing forces within the mind and society as a whole - forces such as insight, respect for truth and not being afraid to search for the truth, and not being afraid to speak out.

Synchronized denial can take place in groups of all kinds. A recent study shows the self-deception that was at work within the group that planned the Bay of Pigs invasion in President Kennedy's administration. Irving L. Janis, a psychologist at Yale University, studied in detail how the plans were laid for that fiasco. It was a textbook case of the collective defenses that Janis has called "groupthink." Essentially, when "groupthink" is at work, group members hobble their seeking of information in order to preserve a cozy unanimity. Loyalty to the group requires that no one raise embarrassing questions, nor attack weak arguments, nor counter soft-headed thinking with hard facts. "The more amiable the esprit de corps among the members of a policy-making group," Janis has observed, "The greater is that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink." Looking back, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who was then on the White House Staff, observed how the meetings in which the Bay of Pigs plan took shape and went on "in a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus." Yet, he suspected that had a single person voiced a strong objection, President Kennedy would have canceled the Plan. In each administration, no matter what the political party, there is at work the same tendency toward self-deception or "groupthink."

Someone is always needed like the little boy in Hans Christian Andersen´s story, "The Emperor's New Clothes," who said, "But he has got nothing on." We always need that kind of person in our midst. What's all this got to do with the Christian Faith, and with today, which is Pentecost Sunday, and with the Holy Spirit?

To begin with, religious groups are as prone to self-deception as any other group — and individuals who are religious are as prone to self-deception as well. That's why Jesus warned his disciples and followers to "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing,

but inwardly are ravenous wolves." And it´s why the writer of I John in the New Testament warns his readers, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

The Church is to be a community of the Spirit in trying to follow the leadings of the Divine Spirit, or the Spirit of God, or that which we call the Holy Spirit. And this is where the problem comes in - often times there are conflicting voices each claiming to be speaking for God's Spirit and yet disagreeing on what is the right direction.

We need to have some ways to test the spirits, to determine what is of God and what is not. And some of the usual tests we might use for other enterprises are not sufficient. For example, merely because an individual or group which claims to have a special revelation of God's Spirit is fast growing and quite successful in other statistical terms as well, does not necessarily mean that it has the truth. Large groups of people have been deceived for long periods of time, and especially by various forms of religion.

The churches that cooperated and blessed what Hitler was doing in Germany in the 1930´s were prospering, while the "anti-Nazi" Church was small, suspect, and persecuted. Often the one or the group that cries out - "The Emperor has no clothes," is not listened to for the time being, but is shouted down.

The churches in this country that continue to bless segregation and the status quo in the south and in other parts of the country as well, often prospered during the 1950´s and 60´s while the churches which challenged prejudice and segregation suffered. Just because the fundamentalist churches seem to be growing more rapidly than others, does not mean they are more in line with God's Spirit. What then are some ways to test the spirits Among us?

First of all, if someone or a group claims to have all the truth and the only truth - BEWARE!!! Jesus said the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit is like the wind. It blows where it will and cannot be controlled or monopolized by any person, religion, or group. Rather, a person or church that is filled with God's Spirit and working with that Spirit is open to new possibilities, new Truth, new discoveries, and is not afraid of the latest biblical discoveries and scholarship. As Pastor John Robinson told our pilgrim fathers and mothers, "The Lord Had yet more light and truth to break forth From the Word." Remember St. Paul wrote, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, Peace, patience, kindness, goodness, Faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Galatians 5:22)

Secondly, it is the witness of the Bible that God's Spirit calls us to wholeness, and to seeing the world and the creation whole. God's Spirit is that which draws us out of ourselves and helps us see our connections with other people who are not like us and with all of creation.

It is significant that on the first Pentecost, when God's Spirit was experienced by the disciples and others with them, they all sensed a oneness, a unity among them that I have not experienced it in the same way before. The book of Acts reports that although they heard people speaking in different languages, they could understand each other regardless. It was as if they were speaking in each other´s native language. There were no barriers to divide them. It is also the witness of the Bible that those movements, religious or otherwise, those leaders, those spirits which would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, dogmatism, are not of God's Spirit. Apartheid, of any kind in any country, is not of God's Spirit. And in the long run, it will fail. However, it can and does cause much pain and suffering in the meantime.

Thirdly, Jesus in his parable of the sheep and the goats described another test for determining those who are following God's Spirit and those who are not. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you clothed me, I was sick, and you visited me, I was in prison, and you came to me."

Then, said Jesus, the righteous will ask - "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And God answers, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

In other words, the way you treat people is the way treat God. It´s one of the most basic tests of the Spirits. See how a religious group or church or movement treats the outcasts of any society — those in trouble, those in need, those who are different from us, those we consider sinners, the losers, the down and out, the cripples, the retarded, homosexuals, the persecuted. Do we avoid those different from us, or do we include them? God´s Spirit working among us is the best defense, the best antidote to our tendency for self-deception, both as individuals and as a group. And we need always to be testing the spirits to see if they are of God. Amen.