

## Life-Giving Holy Spirit

18<sup>th</sup> October – I believe in the Holy Spirit

Readings: John 3:1-10; Romans 8:1-8:1-17.

A few weeks ago, when Susan asked me to speak today, she said: "I think we'll be up to "I believe in the Holy Spirit." My first thought was "Wow! What a fantastic topic." Closely followed by "Help!" With over 300 verses in the NT referring to the Holy Spirit and one modern theologian saying the Holy Spirit is: "the most elusive and difficult of all themes in Christian theology," I found myself echoing the words of John Owen, the great Puritan writer, who produced two massive volumes on the Spirit. He wrote: "Who is sufficient for these things?" Who indeed. So this morning I am just trying to bring you some thoughts that I hope will help us to understand a bit more about who the Holy Spirit is and how we can experience him at work in our lives. Eduard Schweizer reminds us that "Long before the Holy Spirit became an article in the Creed, [He] was a living reality in the experience of the early [primitive] church."

Let's pray.

I am going to use some words from an ancient hymn:

"Come Creator Spirit, visit the minds of those who are yours; fill with heavenly grace the hearts you have made. Amen."

### The person of the Holy Spirit.

I don't know about you, but one of the things I find difficult about the Holy Spirit is thinking about who he is. I can quite easily have in my mind some sort of idea about Jesus, after all he lived here on earth in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, and even about God as Father or Creator, but the Spirit – simply because he is Spirit - is more difficult to get a handle on. Apparently, in one old episode of Coronation Street, Maud Grimes described the Holy Spirit as "a sort of oblong blur." Well, he's more than a blur, oblong or not. In fact, the NT uses several different titles, metaphors or word pictures to describe the Spirit. He is holy, a gift, a dove, fire, wind/breath, oil, living water, and the *paraclete* – the one called to come alongside us. However, as the Nicene Creed says: he is the Lord and Giver of Life, Saying that he is Lord is the same as saying that he is God. In the NT the terms 'Holy Spirit' and 'God' are sometimes used interchangeably. For example, in Luke 1:35 the angel says to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High (that is God) will overshadow you." Then in Acts 5:31 Peter accuses Ananias of lying to the Holy Spirit and then says "You have not lied to men but to God." The Holy Spirit is also described as having some of the same attributes that God has: he is eternal (Heb 9:14); he is omniscient – he knows everything God knows (1Corinthians 2:10-11) and he can be blasphemed against (Matthew 12:31). Then, of course, we recognize that he is one with God every time we say the grace (2 Corinthians 13:14) or baptize someone in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). This is where we get the idea that the Holy Spirit is a part of the three-in-one God we call the Trinity. So, the Holy Spirit is God, having the same substance or essence – the same DNA if you like - as the Father and the Son, but having a distinct role.

Also, like the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is not an abstract force but a person, a person who does the same sort of things that people do: He comforts, hears, speaks, teaches, he has a mind and a will, he has feelings, for he can be

grieved or insulted. He is referred to as 'he' even though the Greek word, *pneuma*, is neuter. The Holy Spirit is a person who is in relation to the other persons within the godhead and who reaches out to us as human persons. He is in the business of communication and relationship – we sometimes refer to 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' – drawing us into a relationship with God as well as with one another.

The Holy Spirit has also been described as 'God as we experience him,' or 'God on the inside,' the one who is at work in us. It is this aspect of the Holy Spirit that I want to focus on this morning. I am not saying that the Holy Spirit is not at work in the world around us, nor that he is not absolutely essential in the church, calling it into being and equipping it with gifts and ministries, but today I want to look at how the Holy Spirit can be at work in us as Christian believers. And to do that I would like to look at our two NT readings.

### **The work of the Spirit in us**

John 3 1-10

This is a very well-known passage, and for many of you I am not going to be saying anything you don't already know. But let's look at v10. Jesus says to Nicodemus: "You are a teacher of Israel – in other words, you are a learned and revered teacher in the community, or maybe, you are a long standing member of our church community – and you don't understand these things?" Nicodemus is struggling but Jesus expects him to know what it is all about because it's there in the OT. In Ezekiel 36:24-27 God makes a promise to his people who are in exile:

"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

Now look at John 3:5 – do you see the reference to being born of water and the Spirit? The water, Ezekiel tells us, is for cleansing; and the new heart and new spirit suggest an inner transformation or renewal to help us live godly lives.

Titus 3:5 says much the same: "[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done BUT because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

If you want a theological term for this it is **regeneration**. John 3 talks about being born again or born from above – the Greek word (*anōthen*) can mean either - and John may have used it because of that, but it is worth noting that elsewhere in John's Gospel it is translated from above. We are born (or maybe reborn) from above – through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. For it is not something we do but something that God does in us, something that happens to us at a point in time. Some of us may be able to say exactly when that was. For others, we may not know when it happened, but we know that it has. The Spirit draws us to Christ, shows us our need for a Saviour and assures us that we, personally, can receive the benefits of Christ's death on the cross for us. We can be forgiven, brought back into a right relationship with God, given a new nature so that can begin to live God's way, and receive the

gift of eternal life. (John 3:16). We will see the same things when we look at Romans 8.

Now let's turn to Romans 8 to see what Paul has to say about how we live that new life with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:1-17

The first thing to notice is that in John 3 Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a member of the ruling Jewish council and a noted teacher, but Paul's letter is addressed to "All in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people." (Rom 1:7) In other words, he is writing to all the Christians in Rome. So, what he has to say here is for everyone, not just the up-front people or the really keen Christians. A. W. Tozer wrote:

"The Spirit-filled life is not a special deluxe edition of Christianity. It is part and parcel of the total plan of God for [all] His people."

Firstly, Paul reinforces what we have already found. Those who are in Christ no longer face condemnation; Jesus has taken our punishment upon himself and we are acquitted. What the Spirit does is to make this real for us. When I was a young child my family went to a Methodist Chapel. I grew up on the hymns of Charles Wesley – And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Saviour's blood; v5 No condemnation now I dread ... I knew Jesus had died for me, and if you had asked me I would have said that I believed it, but one day when I was in my late teens I had a light-bulb moment and the Spirit made it real for me. John Wesley talks of a similar experience in which his heart was "strangely warmed." Mike Breen described it as "knowing in your knower." However you want to describe it, it is a deep inner **reassurance**, of our salvation and also of God's love for us.

Look at verses 15-16:

"The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba," Father. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

Some of us may have had fathers that were a bit distant, or not very good fathers at all, but God isn't that sort of father. "Abba," Daddy speaks of a close loving relationship. When Princess Diana died, one of the most moving things for me was the wreath on her coffin that said simply, "Mummy." She may have been the 'People's Princess' but to William and Harry she was just 'Mummy.' We can describe God in many ways but for those of us who have been adopted into his family he is 'Daddy.' The Spirit helps us to know and experience that for ourselves.

So, we are reborn, and we are adopted into God's family but we have to learn how to live in our new family, how to acquire the family likeness. The technical term for this is **sanctification**, Sanctification is an on-going process of becoming holy, or as Paul puts it in v29 being conformed to the image of Christ – becoming more and more like Jesus. We don't do this by withdrawing from the world around us, forming a holy huddle, but by learning how to engage with the world while living counter-cultural lives. It's not easy. Later on in v17 Paul writes about sharing in Christ's sufferings; maybe he is thinking about outward hardship or persecution but he could also have in mind the need to put to death certain things in our lives.

Thankfully we are not on our own. In v26 Paul talks about the Spirit helping us in our weaknesses and interceding for us. He is the one alongside us, the Comforter or *paraclete* as well as the one at work in us.

Someone once described it as like flying. When an aeroplane takes off it needs an extra boost so that it can overcome the downward drag of gravity. Once it is in the air the laws of aerodynamics keep it flying, but it still needs engine power if it is not to plunge to the ground. Or as Paul puts it: the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death (v2) – the boost -but now we need to keep living, not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (v4). How? For Paul it all begins in the mind; in Romans 12 he talks about being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Here it is about what we set our minds on, what governs our thinking - what we want – the flesh or our self-centred desires – or what the Spirit wants. In Galatians 5 Paul gives a gruesome list of the acts of the flesh and says that Christians, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:19-21, 24) and urges us to be led by the Spirit and produce the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We are all a work in progress and most of us would admit that there is room for growth, but as we mature as Christians we will, hopefully, experience more of the love and peace that Paul talks about here as well as joy, along with the rest of the fruit of the Spirit. The in-dwelling Spirit helps us as we are being transformed into Christ's likeness

But it can be hard going. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves whether we are running on Spirit power or will power? Perhaps we need to be encouraged by looking at how the story ends. As Karl was sharing with us a few weeks ago – it's not the one with the most toys that wins. No, we are co-heirs with Christ Paul says, we're going to share his glory. In the next few verses Paul talks about not just ourselves but the whole of creation waiting, waiting for the return of Jesus and the new heavens and new earth - the picture that we see in Revelation 21 and 22.

And we know we are going to be part of that because says Paul in v11: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you."

Our new life in the Spirit is an eternal life, as John 3:16 says, a life that continues into the age to come.

But what about our lives here and now?

For most of you what I have been sharing won't be anything new, but that's OK – after all we say the Creed nearly every week to remind us of what we believe. But I want to leave you with two things to think about. The first is: What does it mean to say I believe in the Holy Spirit? I am going to use an illustration to answer that.

Have any of you heard of Blondin?

He was a French tightrope walker who became famous for crossing the Niagara Falls. He did it many times but none of the onlookers would accept his challenge to let him carry them over. Eventually his manager, Harry Colcord, agreed and Blondin gave him the following instructions: "Look up, Harry.... you are no longer Colcord,

you are Blondin. Until I clear this place be a part of me, mind, body, and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do we will both go to our death.” That is a good picture of what it means to believe in the Holy Spirit it’s not a fact to tick off but a commitment to trust not in our own capabilities but in the Spirit.

The second thought comes from “More” a book by Simon Ponsonby. He and his family were staying at a holiday cottage in France. It had been a very dry summer and one of the giant koi carp had swum into the shallow end of the garden pond and got marooned, embedded in the sand, and was gradually suffocating. Eventually and with great difficulty, they managed to lever it onto a dustbin lid and plonk it back into the water at the deep end. Simon felt God was saying:

“The church is like that carp: ... She has lived long, fought hard, eaten well. But she has left, or been lured, out of the deep waters. ... Occasional momentary relief from the odd spiritual watering cannot save her. Her only hope is to get back to deep water.”

That message was for the Church as a whole but it can also apply in some ways to us as individual Christians. Like the book’s title we may be wanting something more, more of the Spirit at work in our lives. Not just paddling but swimming to use an illustration from Ezekiel 47.

When Jesus was talking to his disciples about the Holy Spirit he said:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.... If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:9, 13).

We are just going to take a few moments now to think about what we have heard about who the Holy Spirit is and what he is able to do in our lives. You might like to use the Reflection Questions in the Pews News, to help you.

I would like to finish with a prayer.

Our sentence for today says: “What we have received is not the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.” (1 Corinthians 2:12) Father God, thank you for sending your Holy Spirit to be God with us and God in us. Help us to respond to him and to experience more of what it means to live and work in the power of the Spirit. Amen.