

Sunday 7th October 2018
CtK and St John's combined service

Exodus 35:30 – 36:1

1 Cor 12:1-11

John 14:15-end

Who is the Holy Spirit?

So – to start.

A question

How would you describe the colour blue?

{answers}

So, pretty much with exception all the descriptions were comparisons with something which we all recognised.

So - another

what it's like to be in love.....?

{answers}

Again – it's really difficult to even begin to explain without making reference to something else.

I guess we could describe these things in purely practical terms

Blue is after all Light with a wavelength of 490 -450 nm or frequency of 610-670KHz

And you could describe the heart-racing sensation of seeing your beloved – though to be honest it might sound like the way my heart responds when I get paralyingly anxious, so it wouldn't necessarily convey the way I feel about my nearest and dearest.

The reality is, that some things are easy to describe and recognize, but others are much, much more difficult.

Reason for this – today we are thinking about the Holy Spirit

And the Holy Spirit is really, really hard to describe
God = Father or Lord
Son / the Christ = human Jesus, or Jesus the King in heaven

Spirit = ??

The best we can really do is – describe what the Spirit is like (blue) or what the Spirit does (teapot) or how we experience the Spirit (falling in love)

So over the next few minutes I want to use 4 images used in the Bible to help us to understand a little better who the Spirit is, what the Spirit is like, what the Spirit does and how we experience the Spirit.

And as we make this whistle-stop tour, I hope that you will recognise some of the descriptions, some of the actions of the Spirit, some of the emotions – and maybe be reminded, or realise for the first time, that the Spirit is truly alive and active in our own world and indeed in us and our lives today.

The Spirit as the Comforter, the one who brings peace, and assurance, the one who gently teaches
NRSV this morning uses “advocate” – one who speaks for us
KJV used “paraclete” – the one who comes alongside to help
Jesus says – “Peace, I leave with you, my peace I give to you”

Other pictures

Creation – the Spirit brooding over the face of the waters (like a bird) – a sense of nurturing and caring
Jesus’ baptism – the Spirit descending like a dove –the audible assurance – “this is my Son, listen to him”

I’m sure many, if not all, of us have experienced God’s Holy Spirit in this way. Bringing peace and comfort in times of difficulty.

The Spirit as water

Bringing refreshment and cleansing.
Game with cream crackers – or maybe a long walk this summer.

Times when really physically thirsty

Can also have times when we are spiritually thirsty

Ps 42

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Times when we feel far from God, either because of something we have done/not done – or just because life is busy and it's easy to lose the connection.

In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Spirit as being like living water. Not stale, brackish stagnant water, but flowing, sparkling, dancing water – a bit like a mountain stream catching the sunlight on a blue-sky day.
Restoring the soul.

Maybe you have experienced the refreshment, the cleansing, of the Holy Spirit. When you have felt like a dried out sponge – like your heart is made of stone and God is a million miles away – but then in the silence, in the busyness, in the joy of worship, in the loneliness of your own spiritual isolation – you have sensed the restoration of your soul – like a glass of cool water on a hot day, like water on thirsty ground. The Spirit of God.

Wind/Breath of Life

I love the fact that the Bible uses the same word for breath and Spirit. In Genesis 2 we read that “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.”

The Spirit (literally) inspires us. Gives us breath, brings us Life with a capital L – the Life in its fullness that God offers to us. Sustains us, keeps us going.

Elsewhere we read about Jesus telling Nicodemus that the Spirit is like the wind – we don't see where the wind comes from or goes to, but we feel its effect. And of course, in the well known Pentecost reading

“suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.....”

The Holy Spirit can be like the wind in our sails – keeping us moving forward with God.

But wind can be unsettling. It can be scary. It can disturb and shake things up. For the Spirit of God is also the Spirit of justice and of truth. The Spirit can point out to us where we have fallen short of God’s best- not to make us “feel guilty” – but to encourage us to turn back, to realign ourself with God’s ways (what the Bible calls “repentance”)

So maybe you have experienced the Spirit as breath or wind? Shaking you up, or inspiring you. Maybe you have read a passage in the Bible which feels as if it was written just for you, or which has pierced you to the heart in a way that you would not have believed possible. The Spirit of God.

The Spirit as fire

Representing the power of God

Tongues of fire, speaking in tongues, lots of commotion – not very British

Less comfortable?

Power of God to build the church and the Kingdom

NT reading spoke of gifts – wisdom, knowledge and so on

Others – preaching and teaching, leadership

Also – serving (pastoral care), administration, compassion, giving

OT this morning –

Bezalel and Oholiab

Gift of creativity, of using hands and/or imagination to help people come into the presence of God. Gifts of music and poetry – and all sorts of other things.

Given to build up the body, not for personal gratification

All can be used for “me”, or for God

All are equally important

Care and compassion = preaching and prophecy and tongues and interpretation

And all should be used

We need evangelists and prophets today as much as then
Special gift of evangelism – all are called to be witnesses

What are your gifts? How are they being used?
If you think you have a gift that isn't – we need to talk!
Eagerly desire – it's OK to ask
I have asked God for gifts and he has given or grown them in me

So four images to help us to understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus.

Maybe one (or more) of them resonates particularly with you

Important to remember that these are not separate – they are all different aspects of the same Spirit who is one person within the Trinity – like different facets of the same diamond
The Spirit can both inspire us to take action and then empower us to do so

And there's one more very important thing to recognise
Which ever you prefer – all carry a sense of the Spirit being “God with us”
In fact “God within us”
V23 Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and ***we will come to them and make our home with them.***

Important – each of us who follows Jesus has the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God – living within us.
Earlier in Paul's letter to the Corinthians he writes about God “**giving us his Spirit in our hearts**”
2 Cor 1: 21

The Holy Spirit is present in the world – and also in us

So the Spirit is God's constant presence with us **and also** within us
Comforting – if we will accept it
Bringing refreshment – if we will receive it
Showing us the way – if we will listen
Helping us to grow to be more like Jesus

Galatians 6 – fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control)

Often get these the wrong way round

We do not earn God's favour or "become Christians" by working hard at cultivating these attributes

When we commit ourselves to following Jesus' way, when we accept God's invitation in Jesus, when the Spirit comes and lives within us

Then these lovely attributes grow within us, as surely as apples grow on apple trees and strawberries on strawb plants.

But – or should it be "and"

There is one thing more

Maybe we know people who kind of shine inwardly? People in whom the presence of God seems particularly visible. I think there are some people like that here this morning.

The Bible tells us that the Spirit dwells within us

And it also speaks of the Spirit re-filling Peter for a particular task, of Timothy being encouraged to "fan into flame the gift of God which is within you"

I've heard this compared to a central heating boiler. (Bear with me!)

An active central heating boiler will have a pilot light, burning away quietly, day in day out - just kind of keeping the system ticking over. But it's not heating the house. It's not making a difference to the place where it is situated.

To heat the house it has to be activated – it has to fully ignite the boiler – get all the burners going, start pumping the hot water around the system, filling the radiators, bringing warmth to the place. And then – then it does make a difference.

Like all analogies about God, this only goes so far – so stick with the image rather than the detail

The question is – is the Holy Spirit within us more like a pilot light – or the fanned-into-flame full-blown active central heating boiler?

And how do we move from one to the other?

And the answer is – that we ask. We invite the Holy Spirit to be more active in our lives. We have spoken before about how God does not force himself on to us – in his wisdom and mercy he waits to be invited.

Last week, Paul spoke about stewardship – about reconsidering our giving of money in order to resource the mission and outreach of the church, so we can grow in numbers and in faith. So we can hand on the Good News of God’s love and acceptance to the next generations. And if we are to do that, then we not only need to give financially – we need to give ourselves. We need to fan into flames the gifts that God has given us by his Holy Spirit. We need our central heating boilers to be ignited, if you like to think of it that way.

It is a challenge. Do we want to experience more of the Spirit’s peace and comfort? Do we want to grow the lovely fruit of love and joy, patience and faithfulness? Do we want have our spiritual thirst satisfied and to have God breathe His life into us. Are we willing to be shaken by the wind of God?

Big questions. I’m going to give us a moment to think about them , and then for those of us who wish to invite the Spirit to be more active in our lives, I’m going to pray a prayer. It won’t be big or spectacular or scary. Just a gentle prayer to invite the Holy Spirit to become more active in our lives.....