

St James, sermon series, 07/10/18.

The Holy Spirit

Exodus 35: 30-36:1, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, St John Ch. 14, vs.15-31

Right at the beginning of the bible in the book of Genesis we have the story of creation. In verse two we're told that the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters; over the chaos. Here we have the wind, breath, Spirit of God alive and active in creation. And we know, of course, that the next verse tells us that God said 'Let there be light'.

Right from the beginning, then, God's power to change the way things are is manifest. In a limited sense throughout the Old Testament we have evidence of what began to be called the 'Holy Spirit' of God. A thousand years before Christ King David in his great confessional psalm 51 cries out in prayer: 'take not your Holy Spirit from me.' Then in Isaiah chapter 63

we're told that the children of Israel 'grieved [God's] Holy Spirit. We then jump forward to St Luke before we hear a further reference to the 'Holy' Spirit. Of course holiness is the quintessential being of God. For the people of Israel and on into the message of the New Testament there is an ongoing search for a state of holiness. Or, on the other hand, there is, at times, a moving away from that holiness which God envisaged for his people when he said, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' (Leviticus 11: 44).

But what do we know today of the Holy Spirit, and how has, and does, the Holy Spirit impact lives? I noticed in our sermon series discussion last Wednesday afternoon that people, quite rightly, refer to the Creed we say on Sundays to attempt to clarify our understanding of, for instance, 'who is Jesus'. And we can do the same thing regarding the Holy Spirit. So what does the Creed say about the Holy Spirit?

Firstly, though, I want to make clear that there are several Creeds, for instance there's the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed, but the one we use on Sundays is the Nicene Creed formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 BCE. The Holy Spirit, we're told, was there at the annunciation when Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel. We're also told that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds' from the Father and the Son and it is this Holy Spirit who speaks through the prophets.

But let us go deeper... so what is the role of the Holy Spirit and how can the Spirit help us? Well, for a start... Jesus himself actually prays to his Father to send in his place the one he calls the Advocate, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit as we heard in the reading of the gospel.

The disciples missed Jesus, without a doubt, after his Ascension but his presence with them was

always going to be short lived... but the Holy Spirit, the Comforter... Jesus tells them, will abide with them forever and will dwell in them and in all who believe.

We sometimes hear the phrase 'the indwelling of the Holy Spirit' meaning the life of the Spirit within us. One work of the Holy Spirit is to help us to pray. In chapter 8 of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans he says that we do not know how to pray as we ought but the Spirit intercedes for us interpreting our groans and sighs. I don't know about you but I think it's a good thing that my sighs and groans are interpreted! This happens through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Now this permanent indwelling is important. As an illustration I can turn to third century Egypt where the believers known as the Desert Fathers lived in caves or huts spending their time mostly in silence and seeking wisdom from God. They were called

‘Abba’ or Father and people would come to them for a word of advice. Well there is a story that goes like this: Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph in his hut and said: “ Father, according as I am able, I keep to my rule of life, I fast, I pray, I meditate and contemplate in silence and I strive to cleanse my heart from thoughts, what more can I do”? Abba Joseph stood up and stretched out his hands to heaven, his fingers became like ten lamps and he said to Abba Lot; “Why not become all fire”?

We’re all a spark of the Divine and fire is a symbol of purification, of passion, of warmth and of raging power. One imagines that Abba Joseph meant by his metaphor that ‘becoming fire’ Abba Lot would become totally dedicated to God, that he would unleash the power of love into the world and make a difference in his own life and the life of others. He would be filled with the Spirit of God wholly and not just partly.

But of course there are conditions for receiving the Spirit sent by God. Jesus reminds his disciples of the importance of keeping the commandments and imitating him for he says: ‘As the father gave me commandment so I do.’ He encourages all to respond to his teachings and to be adequately prepared and worthy to receive the many gifts and fruits of the Spirit.

Last week we celebrated Harvest, we saw the evidence of generous hearts in all that was given. We saw the fruits of the earth, so to speak, but we’re also called to receive the gifts of the Spirit and a wonderful list of these fruits is written in St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, chapter 5. The fruits are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I’m sure a whole sermon could be written on each one.

Perhaps we could think of one or two of those fruits of the Spirit in the coming days and see how they might enrich our own lives. These fruits of the Spirit are brought to us by that same Holy Spirit of God which hovered over the waters of chaos in the Creation story. Just so, that same Spirit hovers above us and seeks a place in our hearts.

Amen.