
Enter the Spirit

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 28 May 2023

Acts 2:1-21 • 1 Cor 12:3b-13 • John 7:37-44



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Last week, as you may recall, we talked about Jesus being lifted up into heaven, to sit at the right hand of God. This we call the Ascension. He had finished his mission on earth and done all that his Father asked him to do. Literally, and even more symbolically, he went up, to what must have been the coming-home party of all coming-home parties. Imagine the joy and celebration among the angels when this Son returned triumphant! Such joy as we cannot even imagine.

Down below, back on earth, there's a party too, but of a different kind. The Day of Pentecost has arrived. Pentecost means "the fiftieth day," meaning the fiftieth day since Passover. It's also known sometimes as Whitsunday, or White Sunday, referring to the white robes worn by newly baptised persons, those who were baptised on the preceding night. The disciples were gathered

together in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit, making a violent rushing sound, come upon them and filled them with its power.

And the results are immediately obvious. Look at Peter, standing up and addressing the crowd, sure of himself and his faith, in a confident voice for all to hear! Is this not the same man who just a few weeks back had denied Jesus three times (John 18:11-27)? Is this not the same man who knelt by the tomb, saw that it was empty, and went away, “wondering to himself what had happened” (Luke 24:12)? Was he not as helpless and confused as all the other disciples? Whence comes this new-found confidence?

It is the work of the Holy Spirit. Let’s spend some time looking at the Spirit.

The Spirit has always existed, as one of the three persons of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the beginning, we read in Genesis,

the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Gen 1:2)

God is about to create the heavens and the earth, and the Spirit is there, hovering, waiting, serving. It is the Spirit of creation, of bringing something from nothing. Only God is able to do this, bring something from nothing. The Teacher, who is the narrator of the book of Ecclesiastes, wrote that “there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc 1:9), and in a sense he was right, for all that is and all that will be is already known to God. Things will be new for us, but not for our Creator. That is the wondrous extent of the creativity of God, through the Holy Spirit. It was a source of despair for the Teacher, but it is a cause for joy for most of us. How often do we watch a sunset or enjoy a mountain vista, and wonder at the beautiful creation all around us? Every sunset is new every day, no two exactly alike. The snowflakes are all different. The same Bible verse you have read a hundred times will say something different to you on the hundred and first. The Holy Spirit, eternal and ever-surprising, conveys the Father’s will of creation, and continually inspires us.

We tend not to personify the Spirit, as we do the Father and the Son. God has over the years often been portrayed as a wise old man, which is comforting for many, in spite of the fact that God is not man or woman, and we really don’t know what God looks like, and won’t know until we die and come face to face with God. Jesus we can think of as a man, because he was one, for a few years here on earth. This of course follows God’s plan. Jesus was made man through the incarnation so that people on earth could relate to him, and feel close to him. We are given that license by Jesus himself, when he tells the disciples, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus wants us to know his Father, his and ours, and so gave us his own face to relate to and his own being to pray to. We ask for intercession with God in Jesus’ name, as he wishes us to do. Jesus is the face of God.

But the Spirit is a bit of a mystery. Some artists have rendered the three persons of God as three men sitting together. There is a famous icon by the Russian artist Andrei Rublev, painted in the early 15th century, which shows the three sitting around a table — you may have seen it. A copy of it used to sit behind the altar in the Cathedral in the Square. The painting is actually of the three angels who visit Abraham and Sarah, as told in Genesis 18, but it has been interpreted as being of the Trinity.

(More on the Trinity next week — stay tuned!)

But the Spirit is more often thought of as a wind or a breath. The word “inspiration” helps us here: literally, a breathing-in, but symbolically an influence or an effect, like a wind that blows. An “in-Spirit-ing.” A drawing in of the Spirit. This is how it appeared to the disciples on that first Pentecost. We may think of it as a force, or a wind, or a presence.

The prophet Ezekiel felt the Spirit as a force, and heard its voice. Ezekiel saw many visions, including that of God himself, in various images. Ezekiel was also lifted up and moved about by the Spirit:

Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet. (Ezek 3:24)

Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the gate of the house of the Lord. (11:1)

In Acts, too, the Spirit seems to have the power of moving people about. In my favourite story of Philip and the Ethiopian, Philip is whisked away after baptising the eunuch:

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again. (Acts 8:39)

So we see the Spirit as a mover (literally), a motivator, and certainly an agent of God. Ezekiel was moved around by the Spirit in order to see the things that God wanted him to see. Philip was whisked away by the Spirit when he had finished what God wanted him to do for the Ethiopian, and he was needed elsewhere to continue God’s work. The Spirit is an enabler, an agent God may use to further his will, or sometimes to reveal his will, as he did, again, with Ezekiel, speaking in the name of the Lord, and giving Ezekiel power to speak to others in the name of the Lord:

Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet. He spoke to me and said ... When I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says.” (Ezek 3:24, 27)

The Spirit has a special role to play following Jesus’ mission here on earth. In John chapter 14, we read:

Jesus says, “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever

— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15-17)

Jesus, when he leaves, does not leave the disciples (and us) bereft or without comfort or guide. The Spirit’s role here is to serve as the eternal link between us and Jesus: our actual connection to God. The Spirit helps us when we pray. The Spirit is a teacher, and will “teach [us] all things and will remind [us] of everything” Jesus has said to us (John 14:26). The Spirit is our Counsellor, as Jesus was to the disciples during his brief human life.

The Spirit will remain with us until Jesus comes again. As the angels told the disciples who were watching Jesus’ feet disappear into the clouds, Jesus “will come back in the same way [they] have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11) When that day comes, Jesus will take those who love him and trust in him back up to the Father with him. Until that day, we have the Spirit of God as our comforter and advocate. We who have faith will never be alone.

The Spirit makes itself known through our own actions, and is a channel for God’s many gifts to us. Our own creativity as humans, as artists or musicians or writers or creators of any kind, in any sphere of activity, is a small copy of God’s great creativity. What fills our hearts and our minds and inspires us to create anew, perhaps to rearrange what is old and come up with something no human has thought of before — that is the Spirit working in us.

Let us give thanks to God, who sent his only Son to show us the way to salvation, and his Spirit to comfort and guide us always. Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.