

## **Sermon for Sunday 28 May 2023**

### **Pentecost**

When she was little, my sister thought that the Holy Spirit was a biscuit with wings. It's not as silly as it sounds. It was because in the church we went to, near where we sat, there was a monument with a wafer and some wings on it – meant I'm sure to indicate the presence of the Holy Spirit at Communion. My sister decided this must be a picture of the Holy Spirit.

As we celebrate Pentecost today, I wonder what is our picture of Holy Spirit? What is he? What does he do? What do we know of the Holy Spirit from our own experience? And why don't we experience more of the Holy Spirit? This morning, I'm going to explore these questions.

What is the Holy Spirit?

Before he ascended to his Father Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations and to baptise "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28: 19). Some time after those words were written, the early

church concluded that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing, so correctly 'he' or 'she' rather than 'it'. I'm going to say 'he' for convenience this morning. The Creed tells us that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father and the Son', reminding us that He doesn't act independently, but on behalf of the Father and the Son and according to their will. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to His disciples before he ascended to His Father (Acts 1: 4 – 5). Elsewhere, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "the spirit of truth" (John 16: 13 – 14) who will guide the disciples into understanding the truth and will glorify Jesus and the Father. He also calls him the Advocate or Helper, who will be with the disciples for ever (John 14: 16 – 17). And Jesus says that the world cannot receive the Spirit because it does not know him, but Jesus' disciples know Him because the Spirit lives within them.

The Holy Spirit is hidden from the world – and yet active in the world as well as in the church. The Holy Spirit is elusive – powerful and yet controlled. We don't see Him, but we know

when He's around. In our reading from Acts He comes from heaven like a wind which fills the whole house where the disciples are sitting. Or like tongues of fire which appear and rest on each one of them. By contrast in our reading from John's Gospel Jesus simply breathes on the disciples and says "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20: 22), reminding us that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and that He can be received and experienced in different ways.

So, what does the Holy Spirit do?

Here are some answers which arise from today's readings -

The Holy Spirit is a communicator of God's messages, and in particular the message of the good news about Jesus. In today's reading from Acts He literally propels the disciples outside the house to share the good news with the crowd who have gathered. And he gives them the ability to communicate, by making them speak in the many languages spoken by the crowd. He also inspires Peter to preach the first sermon of the church. He gives the understanding and the

words to say, and he makes Peter's words powerful so that lives are changed.

From 1 Corinthians we also learn that the Spirit gives gifts to all God's people. We're all born with a unique range of natural gifts and abilities. But these are additional gifts, given so that the church can function. There are several different lists of gifts in Paul's letters, and some, like prophesy or the gift of tongues are more obviously supernatural than others – for example the gifts of administration, or generosity. All of them, however, are spiritual gifts and all are valued. There is no hierarchy of 'super-Christians' who have the more spectacular gifts. Gifts are given, not so that we can feel special or holy, but to be used and shared 'for the common good' – for building up the church and for sharing the Gospel. And gifts are just that. Gifts from God. So no one can boast, and we can all thank God for them.

That's a very brief summary of who the Spirit is and what He does. There's a great deal more,

but I'd like to move on to think about how the Holy Spirit acts in our own lives.

What do we know of the Holy Spirit from our own experience?

We may not immediately know, but it's worth reflecting on.

Here's an encouragement to start with. In our Corinthians reading today Paul says "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord!' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:30). If we can say 'Jesus is Lord' – and mean it of course - the Holy Spirit has been at work in our lives!

There are many ways of experiencing the Holy Spirit. They are not necessarily dramatic, although they may be. Perhaps a comforting presence – especially in times of distress. The 'peace that passes all understanding' when in a stressful situation. An answer to prayer – suddenly you can see the way forward or you know what you need to do. The right words to say in a difficult situation or to someone in distress. Or the sense that God is present when

you stand up to read, to pray or to lead in church. A sudden unexpected opportunity to speak about your faith which feels natural and right, and helpful to the hearer. And again, you just seem to have the right words to say.

And then there are the 'Godincidences'. Most often these happen to me when I have been more prayerful. When instead of insisting on my schedule I allow God to organise my day. For example, I go across to church for some small thing and meet someone who needs to speak to me. Only yesterday I met someone on Church Road in this kind of way. It wasn't dramatic. It was just useful. You can always say they are just coincidences, but they do happen quite a lot.

One example from last September particularly struck me. I went away on retreat to Wales. Not long before I went, someone gave me a bag of books to give to the retreat centre because they were starting a second-hand bookstall. There was a book on the top of the pile that interested me, so my friend said I could have it if I wanted. I took the book with me to read on retreat – and

on the first or second session my retreat guide said something like. I don't usually do this, but there's a book you might find helpful.....

You've guessed it. It was the same book! God had got there before any of us and organised it. And that, I think, in a small way, is an example of the Holy Spirit in action, in response to the prayers of several people!

So, briefly, to my last question.

Why don't we experience more of the Holy Spirit?

I think there are several reasons.

First, Our expectations may be too low. We don't really expect God to act in us and through us. We don't feel important enough, competent or worthy of God's notice. This is a lie. God has poured out His Spirit on us all, and He longs to transform us and work through us all.

Second, In my experience the Holy Spirit is more often quiet than dramatic. Unless we are

prayerfully reflecting on our life we may simply not notice that He has been around.

Third, We don't always invite Him or welcome Him into our lives. He won't push Himself on us, but just like Jesus He will respond to our heartfelt prayers. We all need to pray more.

So let's pray now

“God of power,  
May the boldness of your Spirit transform us,  
May the gentleness of your Spirit lead us,  
May the gifts of your Spirit  
Be our goal and our strength  
Now and always.”

Amen

*Revd Diana Young*