

## **'The Holy Spirit and Truth'**

Preached by the Revd Rob Gilbert, Sunday 12 January 2014 – The Baptism of Christ – at 10.00 am at St Peter's, Wolvercote.

Isiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-end

In what I have to say today I want to emphasise two related themes – the Holy Spirit and truth. They are individually big themes, I know, but they are directly and intimately related and the way I hear our readings they seem to me to be two things we should focus on.

In fact what I want to argue, in the end, is that the Holy Spirit and truth are the same thing – or rather that truth is a particular example of the Holy Spirit being at work, wherever we find truth. I mean, real truth, truths that do not change, truths like scientific facts in their simplest forms and truths like the love between a mother and a child or actually true love between any two people. Truths like a long and devoted marriage, truths like a life lived well. Another truth human beings identify is what they are meant to do with their lives, or particular ways in which they are meant to live, and discoveries like that often throw everything else into a different light. For me, being ordained is a realisation of that. I'm aware that being ordained is good for me, makes me more complete as a person, makes more sense of who I am. The same will be true for innumerable people in all walks of life, at home and at work, in their relationships and responsibilities. The same I hope will be true for each of you. The Holy Spirit is at work in these things just as much as it is in big truths like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. I want to look at how truth in our lives – whether it's factual truth or other-people truth – is an experience of the Holy Spirit.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus by John at the Jordan. To me, Jesus's baptism stands out as the first moment he most clearly understood the truth about himself, about what he had to do. Later on there were other things we believe Jesus understood, such as his creation of a new kind of family around himself (one of which we are members), or his isolation at Gethsemane on the night he was arrested, or his sense of abandonment on the cross. But at his baptism I think Jesus saw clearly what he had to do and how he had to do it and that this was the moment he started to see his life in its most truthful light.

Jesus had a childhood like any human being. The gospels give us stories about what that was like – his birth, the flight to Egypt, the story of the boy in the temple aged 12 astounding the elders with his wisdom. There are no stories about the carpenter's workshop in Nazareth in our gospels but we can imagine scenes from there too. As he grew up Jesus must have had a growing perception of the purpose of his life, of what he was meant to do with it. But like all humans he must have also been unsure at times exactly what it was he was meant to do.

We don't know, of course, but I think it's helpful to suggest that the feelings we can have when we find our own purposes in life are similar to what Jesus felt when he was baptised.

That Jesus's experience was like ours. Put it this way: say Jesus had a sense he needed to transform the relationship between his people and their God. He had a very close sense of God being with him in particular, and of God's overwhelming, indiscriminate, completely graceful love. Jesus had a sense that he could do something to change the world, to bring the people around him – and especially the sick and poor and other people no one decent wanted to talk to – into a new kind of relationship to their God. But maybe he wasn't quite clear how, what the way forward was, or to what extent things should change. Maybe he wasn't quite clear about the reach of his mission, or whether it was supposed to involve getting rid of the Romans.

But there's this preacher, this baptiser John – someone Jesus knows well, a member of his own family, but who's a bit like an old fashioned prophet. And this John the Baptist seems to be trying to do something really important, and something that is a bit like what Jesus feels he should be doing too. Maybe John and he should work together? So he goes to be baptised. And he doesn't know what's going to happen, he isn't just going through the motions, he really *wants* to be baptised by John. Jesus knows this is the right thing to do, now, even if he doesn't know *why*.

So, coming out of the crowds around John, he's baptised, and it happens. Suddenly everything makes sense. Of course, before he was baptised Jesus could remember all sorts of formative or revealing experiences he had had. Such as the time in the temple when he was 12 – how cross his parents were, how the old men were spellbound by what he said, even though he didn't understand why. But suddenly that and all the other important, or you could say truthful, experiences of his life make sense in a fresher way. "AH!" He says, "NOW I see it!" Everything he remembers is now pulled together into the right perspective. It all crystallises. His life has a new coherence, he can see a pattern that led him to this moment and he can see better now where he needs to go from here.

[This, in itself, is an experience of the Holy Spirit. But because of Jesus's sense of his closeness to God it seems especially real to him, physically close, physically transforming. He feels the upwelling of the Spirit in him and the downpouring of the Spirit on him like the weight of a dove, and like the brush of a dove's wing, and the breeze from the flap of its wings. It isn't a perception of how things make sense that goes away. It's a perception that's going to stay with him. And Jesus hears a voice, or something like a voice anyway, and it's saying: you are my Son, and I love you. And, maybe, I am your Father, your Abba.

This coming of the Spirit was something the people were waiting for. Hundreds of years earlier, in the time our Isaiah reading was written, the people were waiting for it. We heard the evidence of that as our first reading today, where it spoke of someone on whom God's spirit rests, and about a breath and a spirit to be given to the people. How does Isaiah characterise the spirit? Well, among other things it's the spirit of truth – truth as in justice, truth as in righteousness. The kind of truth that can make people see and can liberate them from the darkness of a prison.

John the Baptist had been waiting for this spirit too. If Jesus's baptism makes sense of Jesus's life, clarifies his mission and confirms that he has the Spirit needed for it, then it also makes sense of the life of John. It fulfils John's life. He had been baptising, calling for the renewal of right living among the people. This seemed what he should be doing – but it wasn't clear what the intended destination was. What kind of spiritual renewal was John preparing the people for? At Jesus's baptism though, it's as if John says: "Ah, yes, here at last, now I see what it was all about." It turns out John is the last of the prophets, it turns out that Jesus *is* the one they were all pointing too. John the Baptist, fired up by the demands that the prophets made for a right way of living – for repentance, for kindness, for social transformation, for the sacrifices of our hearts not of our livestock – suddenly sees it all makes sense in Jesus.

The Spirit that Jesus became first fully aware of at his baptism is something he lived by for the rest of his life. And in the end he could name it, he could tell his disciples what God's Spirit is – as for example in John's Gospel where he says that he will leave them the Spirit of truth, the Advocate<sup>1</sup>: what Isaiah called the spirit of justice and righteousness but which in Jesus has been made fully visible. On trial before Pilate, Jesus says: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

You'll remember Pilate's withering response: "What is truth?"<sup>2</sup>

The Spirit of truth is what we still live by and experience now. Right from the beginning of the Church it's been among us and in us. There is something compelling about Peter's cry at the end of our second reading, which has the ring of someone who remembers what it felt like suddenly to see the truth, suddenly to get it: "All the prophets testify about him..." – for which read, "We didn't realise it before, but then we saw, it's true, *all* the prophets were speaking about him."]

I spoke before about our truthful relationships and actions and how they make sense of our lives. As I said at the start, looking back I think we can see how the Spirit has been with us in the past, at times or in relationships of particular grace. But we also have our own "Now I see it" moments when we can feel the Spirit especially strongly, in a moment, like Jesus did at his baptism. You could call them "Ah, I see!" moments – the moments when things suddenly click and we say: "Right, now I get it". They happen with films and novels and poems – the line that suddenly makes sense of the whole thing, that pulls it into shape, that gives us the right perspective on it, or that completes it. This is the Holy Spirit at work, the Spirit of truth. They happen in our everyday lives – when we realise something we should do, or how we should respond to a situation we are confused about. They can happen in response to prayer or because we've been worrying or thinking about a problem for a while, or they can even just seem to come from nowhere. And for "Ah, I see!" moments read also

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:15-17

<sup>2</sup> John 18:37-38.

“Eureka!” moments. Because when things click in science too, when the insight comes that makes sense of the data you’ve got, that I think is also the Spirit of truth speaking to you.

I think that speaking of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, which is one of the things Jesus called him, helps us to understand who the Holy Spirit is and how he really is with us for ever, as Jesus promised and as he realised at his own baptism. Amen.