

The Giver of Life

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon at St Peter's, Wolvercote, on Pentecost Sunday, 30th May, 2009

John 16, v.7

Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

Our Advocate, as the New English Bible translates it, is of course the Holy Spirit. Today, Pentecost Sunday, we remember the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But the concept of the Spirit was far from new – it is found throughout the Old Testament. In Genesis we are told that the Spirit brooded over the face of the waters as the curtain rose on creation. The Spirit was active throughout the whole chequered history of Israel. Why then should we choose Pentecost to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit? Indeed why did the Holy Spirit have to come at Pentecost at all? A third question, which follows from the first two, is quite simply: does it matter? Is belief in the Holy Spirit an essential ingredient in Christian faith?

Jesus himself mentions the Spirit remarkably little, and when he does it is in the 14th, 15th and 16th chapters of St. John's Gospel, the great 'farewell discourses' in which Jesus prepared the disciples for his leaving them as an earthly companion. He speaks of the Spirit as something still to come: while he, Jesus, is here on earth, the Holy Spirit seems to fade into the background. Like many ideas in the Old Testament, the idea of the Holy Spirit remains vague and shadowy; its functions are never defined. In our reading of that strange passage in Ezekiel this morning the Lord promises to put his spirit within those whom he brings back from their graves to live in the land of Israel, but it gives no clue as to the nature or purpose of the spirit. The prophet Joel is cited in our lesson from Acts, promising that will, 'in the last days' pour out his Spirit upon all flesh' – this will lead, we are told, to prophesy and salvation, but the nature of the spirit remains unexplained. So the disciples, with their O.T. concepts, could never be expected to understand the nature of the Spirit. If Jesus referred frequently to the Spirit, they would inevitably assume that he was speaking about this vague presence. It was Jesus' job to reinterpret the role of the Spirit to the disciples, and through them, to the early Christian communities and all the subsequent generations of Christians.

This reinterpretation could only be lived out in Jesus' own earthly ministry. Until he had shown them, and they had understood, they were not ready to learn about the Spirit. This is why Jesus leaves this part of his teaching to the Farewell Discourses – he can leave it no longer, as he is soon to leave them and his earthly life. The Spirit to come was to be the Spirit redefined and interpreted by Jesus in his teachings.

But why is it for the good of the disciples that Jesus leaves them? And why is the Spirit *only* going to come when Jesus has left them? When we think about it, the first disciples were incredibly privileged: they had walked with Jesus in the cornfields, sat with him in the boat on the lake, eaten with him, prayed with him. They had the benefit of small classes and a teacher who knew each one of his pupils intimately. He led them on plenty of field trips, providing the circumstances when teacher and

students can really get to know one another. Such an education should surely yield good results in the form of a mature, considered faith.

But what became of this faith at the time of crisis? ‘They all left him and fled’ – Mark 14, v50: their faith fell to pieces. Simon Peter did indeed follow ‘afar off’ – but only to the place where he could stand and warm himself, and say ‘I know not the man’. As we confront our own weaknesses and doubts it is some comfort to know that the men Jesus himself chose as his first disciples failed so completely, even after their companionship with Jesus and the preparation which he had given them. Did Jesus wonder, as many parents do when their children go off the rails, where he had gone wrong? Probably not, because he had after all told Peter that he would deny him. And yet just a few weeks later these same men are found courageously confronting the rulers of their nation, and ‘rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the Name’ (Acts 5,v.41). What explains the transformation? It is the very Spirit of which Jesus speaks, the spirit which has become the very breath of their lives now that Jesus is no longer with them in the flesh.

When Jesus told the disciples that he was leaving them for their own good, he was stating a fundamental principle of true education. The teacher’s job is to prepare his students for *the time of separation*. That is the time when the student can find in herself or himself the resources to stand alone: to follow the directions given, but without further aid. Parents too prepare their children to be independent and self-reliant – it is no good doing everything for them, because the parents will not always be there – they must be able to stand on their own feet. My third-year students are in the middle of their final exams at the moment, and like every tutor I wonder how they will do – how well are they prepared for the moment of separation, as it were, now that the time has come for them to stand on their own feet, drawing on their own intellectual resources. It is not only that such a time of separation *must* come: it is a *good thing* that it does, for otherwise the intellectual training which true education should develop will never be exercised.

We tend to think of this strength as wholly our own, and hence we speak of *self-reliance*. But this is not really the case. Even apart from any religious consideration, the inner quality in which we place our trust is the deposit of the tradition in which we were brought up, of the influence of parents and teachers, and of the total environment – spiritual, mental and physical – from the moment of our birth. If we had been carried off in infancy to live among savages, we should be savages now: ‘what hast thou that thou didst not receive?’ said St. Paul to the Corinthians (1, 4v7).

Christians believe that it is the Holy Spirit – the ‘Giver of Life’ – who is the source of what spiritual strength we may have. Jesus prepared his pupils for separation so that, when the Spirit came, they were ready to receive him. When Jesus’ work on earth was done, he had to leave his disciples. Only then was the vague concept of the Spirit in the Old Testament given definition as the ‘comforter and advocate’, the ‘giver of life’ which was alive in the hearts of the early Christians. In this way it has been said that Calvary – Jesus’ death on the cross – was the gateway to Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit to Christ’s disciples. It was precisely this conviction which impelled the Church in Western Europe to describe the Holy Spirit in the Creed as ‘proceeding from the Father *and the Son*’. This wasn’t just an

academic dispute with the Eastern churches: they were recognising that it was Jesus who, in his earthly ministry, prepared the way for the coming of God's Holy Spirit, which is *his own living presence in the hearts of men and women*. Only by Jesus' death could the first disciples, and the generations that were to follow them, come to know that inner strength, as distinct from a minute-to-minute reliance on the external, visible presence of Jesus.

So by the Holy Spirit we mean the living presence of Christ amongst us - living in the hearts of his disciples. Defined like this, it sounds absolutely fundamental, yet there are many of us probably give little conscious thought to the Holy Spirit - and when we do we find it rather puzzling. Does it matter? Is the Holy Spirit in the end a matter of doctrine which can safely be left to theologians? In one sense, I think the answer is yes. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity - God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - goes beyond anything that the New Testament defines. The Trinity, and the *doctrine* of the Holy Spirit, is not a divinely revealed formula, but an attempt to rationalise the beliefs, experience and speculations of Christians over the centuries. Ultimately there is no separation between God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is an identity of Christ and the Spirit within the hearts of Christ's disciples - as Paul Tillich says, writing about Paul's letter to the Romans:

Paul calls this new being 'Christ' in so far as it first became visible in Jesus Christ. And he calls it Spirit' in so far as it is a reality in the spirit of every Christian Both names designate the same reality'.

It was this for which Jesus prepared the first disciples, and this which transformed their hearts and minds, giving them untold courage and strength, after he left them.

Jesus' promise to the first disciples is and always will be the source of the Christian hope, the source of what strength and inner resources we all find to live out our lives: 'And be assured, I am with you always, to the end of time' (Matthew 28 v20).