

A Faith to Live By...

Sermons on the Apostles' Creed

9. "I believe in the Holy Spirit..."

With this clause the creed changes its focus from things which, we might say, God has done and does *for us* but which are and remain external to us (chiefly those things God has done by *becoming one of us* in Jesus) to things which God does, is doing and will do *in us* and *with us* and *through us*. Put differently, we turn now to consider our human *response* to all that God has done for us in the work of creation and redemption. But in doing so we do not shift our gaze from God onto ourselves alone. For what we discover is that this, too, is the sphere of God's distinctive presence and action, and that human response to the gospel (in the life of faith and obedience, and the community within which that life is lived out) is itself part of the work of God for us, and only possible at all on those terms. Here, as the third 'I believe' of the Apostles Creed reminds us, we turn from the spheres of God's activity in which Father and Son are the primary agents, to reckon with the third way in which God is God – the sphere of activity of the Holy Spirit.



Witness to the Spirit in Scripture is plentiful in both testaments, and we need to grapple with the whole of it in order to get a balanced picture. Obviously, that task lies beyond the range of this study, so I'll have to pick and choose carefully, and you can go and grab a Bible and concordance and read further for yourselves!

Mention of the Spirit of the LORD comes early in the story, as the Spirit is pictured 'hovering' or 'sweeping' over the waters of chaos from which God will call forth the order and beauty of the created order. As we have already seen with reference to the New Testament's ways of



speaking of Jesus, to be implicated in the work of creation is, for Jewish authors and readers, to be identified with and as God himself, and in the Old Testament the Spirit is regularly viewed as the mode and agent of God's own personal creative engagement with the world. So, Psalm 104:30 envisages God 'sending forth' his Spirit to create and to sustain his creatures, an image that has suggestive resonances with his 'breathing' life into Adam in the creation story itself. (The Hebrew term *ruach* can be translated spirit, breath or wind; but whichever of those options are chosen in a given verse, the creative interplay between them will have been obvious to a Jewish reader in a way that English simply misses. The same play on meanings is very obvious, for instance, in the familiar vision of the 'dry bones' in Ezekiel 37.)



And because in order to speak we rely on our breath (utterance is an aural modification of breathing out), there is a natural and close connection too between God's Spirit and his Word in Old Testament thought, and while the prophets are first and foremost those to whom the Word of the LORD comes, they are also figures associated with the empowering activity of the Spirit of God. They speak the Word using human words but can do so only in the power of the Spirit. In fact, in Israel's life the Spirit's presence and activity tends to be concentrated on key figures who bear particular responsibilities. In particular, in addition to the prophets, priests and royal rulers were understood to be subject to the influence or bearers of the presence of God's

Spirit, this being symbolized by their each being ‘anointed’ (with oil, but oil taken to symbolize the Spirit) for their task. And all this comes to a head and into sharp focus, of course, through the gradual emergence of the hope for a human figure who, supremely, would be ‘the anointed one’, the Mashiach, Messiah, or Christ. So, for instance, we get the familiar words from Isaiah 11 about the Davidic King who will arise and transform the moral and spiritual conditions of the earth: “The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him ... and his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD” (Isaiah. 11:2-3). The most expansive vision in the Old Testament’s repertoire, though, challenges or complements this eventual concentration of the Spirit’s work in a single human figure, setting alongside it the hope that on the Day of the LORD the Spirit of the LORD will no longer be restricted in any way, but will be poured out liberally not just on the people of Israel (see, e.g. Ezekiel 36:24-38) but ‘on all flesh’ (Joel 2:28), granting to all God’s creatures the sort of ‘knowledge’ of God hitherto limited to the intimate contact enjoyed by prophets and others.



In the New Testament, of course, mention of God’s Spirit is everywhere, and it begins in its concentration in the story of Jesus. Because the Spirit’s work in the New Covenant does not begin with us; it begins with Jesus, the one who came to share our human nature, and from within it to regenerate and redeem it and offer it back to the Father on our behalf and for our sake. This was as much the work of the Spirit as it was the Son, and that precisely why Jesus is everywhere and always identified as ‘Jesus the Messiah’ (Jesus *Christ*) – that is, Jesus the man especially anointed, endowed, filled, empowered by the Spirit of God. The intimate involvement of the Spirit with the Son’s humanity begins right at the beginning, with his conception and birth, takes on a decisive new stage at his baptism, and thereafter is everywhere involved with all that Jesus does, in teaching, healing, suffering and dying, and, of course, in his resurrection from death. To use the terms of a nascent trinitarian theology (which begins to emerge in the pattern of Jesus ministry): The Spirit is the

Spirit of the Father (Matt. 10:20) and the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6); the Father sends or pours out the Spirit into the Son's human life, and all that the Son does humanly he does 'in the power' of the Spirit who indwells him. The whole life of the divinely 'anointed one', from birth cry to last breath is lived in the Spirit, and the whole is, at the last, offered up to the Father in an act of worship in which the Spirit too is 'offered back', his work in the humanity of Jesus now completed. This last point is nicely made in a suggestive verse in John's gospel where we read 'Jesus ... said "it is finished". Then he bowed his head and παρέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα.'



Those last three words are generally rendered 'gave up his spirit'; but they are equally well (and perhaps better) translated 'handed over (or 'offered up') the Spirit'.

Let's pause for a moment to take stock of something very important. First, one of the most characteristic features of the New Testament's references to the Spirit is the predominance of the use of the prefix 'Holy'. The Spirit is precisely the *Holy Spirit*, and not some other spirit. As we'll see duly, this has to do in significant measure with the Spirit's role in drawing the world, and human lives, into gradual conformity to or correlation with God's own character. He is the Spirit of holiness. But bearing in mind that the 'Holy One' in Scripture is a designation reserved for God himself, this regular prefixing of the adjective to identify the Spirit also underscores the New Testament writers' awareness and conviction that in dealing with the Spirit they are dealing precisely with the Spirit of God, and that means with God himself, present in person. The Holy Spirit is identical with the Holy One of Israel. So, for instance, Paul drives the point home further by referring to the Spirit not just as 'the Spirit of the Lord' but as 'The Lord' (ὁ κύριος) himself (2 Cor. 3:17), the Greek term laden with theological significance for Jews as the normal circumlocution for *Yahweh*, the unutterable (and unscritable!) divine name – which, we might note here, was unutterable precisely because it was held to be so *holy*!!

It's important, too, to be clear that the Holy Spirit is God present *in person*, and not some impersonal force or surge of divine energy. In the language of later trinitarian theology the Spirit is a third 'person' alongside Father and Son in God, and although we need to be careful in not reading too much into this technical term, it is clear that the Spirit is a third centre of what we may properly refer to as 'personal activity' in God, and not simply a way in which the Father or the Son is present to us 'in person'. There is a certain anonymity about the Holy Spirit, who is never the centre of attention in Scripture, and who, we might say, never draws attention to himself (or herself – gender here is up for grabs if we are going simply to avoid the impersonal suggestion of 'itself') but is always concerned to draw attention to (and enable our response to) the Father and the Son. The Spirit has been likened, helpfully (except for the impersonal nature of the analogate), to a well-positioned floodlight, illuminating that which it is its task to illuminate and draw attention to, while itself remaining hidden and unnoticed in the shadows. Yet, unlike a piece of lighting



equipment, the Spirit acts and wills and relates, both within the life of God (he/she is another alongside Father and Son) and within the shape of Christian experience. We experience God three ways at once – as Father, as Son and as Holy Spirit, a triunity captured classically in the dynamics of prayer, which is most typically offered to the Father, through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

If the Holy Spirit's work in the New Covenant begins with Jesus, it certainly does not end there, and the promise of Old Testament texts such as Joel 2 and Ezekiel 36 quickly became picked up by the early church to make sense of its experience – an experience in which the coming of the Holy Spirit (his being 'sent' or 'poured out' by the risen and ascended Christ) was no longer upon the key characters in Jewish national life such as Herod or Caiaphas, but upon ordinary men and women who were believers in and followers of Jesus, and (scandal of scandals!) was not even

limited to Jews but, as the bizarre experience of the Day of Pentecost revealed, on gentiles from all over the known world too. In fact, the reception of God's Holy Spirit was, in the apostolic era, part of the basic package of the entailments of becoming or being a 'Christian' (a 'Messianist') at all. Repent – be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins – receive God's Holy Spirit. That was the threefold induction into the community of those who were followers of Jesus. So, far from



being limited to a special cohort of particularly important or 'spiritual' people, 'having' God's Holy Spirit dwell within you was the most basic of requirements for belonging to the church, and it was

something (someone) available to absolutely anybody who would receive it rather than turn their back and walk away.

Again, it would be good to pause at this point and take stock. It's remarkably easy to be casual and complacent about this state of affairs, and to fail to allow the enormity of it to capture our imagination, and thereby our hearts and minds and wills. We have referred on a number of occasions in previous studies to the substance of biblical hope which may be summed up by saying that the world was created for God and God's creatures to dwell together, a circumstance symbolized in ancient Israel by the tabernacle and the temple, but incapable of full realization due to the spoiling of creation by sin and death; but in the new, reborn, transformed world which God has promised, that dream of heaven and earth coming together, of God being with and at the centre of a 'creation restored by love' as our liturgy has it, and sharing in intimate fellowship with us, will at last be realized and the purpose of God's creative project finally fulfilled. So, John the 'seer' and author of the Book of Revelation writes of the coming down of 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem' from heaven to earth, and of a loud voice saying "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with

them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away' (Rev. 21:1-4). We get the picture! But the heart of it is the proximity and availability of God to his creatures in a wholly and radically new way. And in that situation, John avers, there will be no temple in the city. After all, what need will there be of a temple. God will be dwelling in the whole of it, and not in some spatially limited part of it. And his glory will illuminate the whole of it (Rev. 21:22-25).

That something decisive has happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, something which gives that 'new creation' an identifiable foothold in the midst of the old, fallen and broken world in which, for now, we live out our lives, that is precisely the conviction of Christian faith. Because in Jesus God himself has come to 'tabernacle' with us not in the temple, but in the flesh and blood of his own humanity, redeeming and renewing it, fulfilling from within it the terms of the ancient covenant made by God with Israel, uniting himself to us, and offering his humanity (and us with it) back to the Father in 'single, holy, living sacrifice' effected in the power of the Spirit. As we saw last week, this radical new dwelling among us in the life of Jesus was only a beginning, and Christians look forward to the last day, when Christ will return 'to judge the living and the dead', viz, to transform the world (and us with it), purging it of sin and evil, and establishing it as a place fit for God's dwelling with us, just as he has already made his own humanity a 'place' fit for God's indwelling and fit to be taken up into God's presence and seated 'at the Father's right hand'. The symbolism comes thick and fast; but the gist is clear enough. And it is the desire, the longing, the hope and expectation of Christians (trusting in the further fulfilment of God's promises and the completion of his purposes) that God will, as in John's vision, 'tabernacle', camp, be with, dwell amongst us in such a manner that we 'know' him and enjoy him intimately as we were always intended to.

In the meanwhile, we struggle on, living our lives in the light of that hope and by faith. But the coming of the eternal Son in the flesh is not the only concrete anticipation of that final hope. Yes, the Son creates for himself his own humanity in

the womb of Mary and comes to indwell it. But in doing so, he also becomes a locus of the Holy Spirit's indwelling and activity, another way in which God is intimately present, and at work transforming and renewing our humanity and thereby our world. And – to reiterate – this mode of God's being 'with us' is not restricted to Jesus, though it has its origin with him. But the Holy Spirit is a gift not only for the Son, but also for us, those to whom the Son has united himself by taking flesh, and he is to be 'poured out' prodigally on 'all flesh', starting, it seems, with those who believe in and follow Jesus himself. So – and this is the *caboose*, as some of my



American friends would say, of what may otherwise seem a long train of lateral thinking – the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us (and if we are Christians at all,

Paul tells us, we *have* the Holy Spirit dwelling in us) is the personal, intimate coming to be with us and in us of God himself, the Holy One of Israel the vision of whom had Isaiah quaking in his boots, the Creator of all things in heaven and earth. And as such, this is the next step in God's anticipation of his great promise, the foothold he retains in the midst of this messy, broken, sinful and suffering world.

'Where is God??', people rage and cry in the midst of it all (usually when things are going badly). The disconcerting answer, or a significant part of it at least, is 'God is *here*, dwelling in you and me as disciples of Jesus; watching, listening, waiting to see how long it will take for us to notice or remember, and waiting for opportunities to be at work in and through us, changing us, changing our relationships to people and things around us, and so changing the world in ways that point beyond its present malaise to its true reality as yet to come. If we really dwell on that, really believe it and take it seriously, and call it to mind in the comings and goings and doings of daily life, it ought not to generate a complacent or casual attitude, but a peculiar mixture, perhaps, of awe, worship, thanksgiving and nervousness! Paul grapples with some of the spiritual and ethical implications of it directly in his letters to the churches at Corinth and Ephesus. (See, with a certain amount of editorial license, 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; Eph. 2:21-22; 4:30.) *You*, he tells them (referring both to individuals

and to the church as a community of such individuals) are now the *temple*, the place where God himself dwells through his Spirit; and the point of the temple is to be a place where God is *glorified*, not horrified; a place where God can enjoy the smell of fragrant sacrifices, not grit his teeth in the face of things that revolt and anger him. The temple is a holy place, and to treat it disrespectfully is sacrilege. So, Paul urges his readers, don't treat your bodies (or your minds or imaginations) lightly, or as though they were your personal property to be done with or done to as you personally please. They aren't! They are places in which God now deigns graciously to dwell in the person of the Holy Spirit, places dedicated to glorifying God and enjoying him. So, put away and have nothing to do (in body, heart, mind or soul) with anything that is bound to *grieve* God's Holy Spirit. Because you aren't grieving him at a distance: in effect you are carrying offensive offerings right into the heart of the sanctuary and dumping them directly under his nose. That is, as Sir Humphrey Appleby might have said, a 'very *brave* course of action'!



The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon says somewhere: "Without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing. We are as ships without the wind, branches without sap, and like coals without fire, we are useless." And yet, one more recent commentator has observed, whereas if the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from the church of the Book of Acts 98% of its activity would have ground to a halt, if the Holy Spirit were to withdraw from today's church, 98% of its activity would continue business as usual. The proportions are exaggerated, no doubt; but the point is an important one: Christian congregations, denominations, and individual Christian lives can easily become the domain of routine, systems, rotas, and religious habit – things which we repeat and do day in and day out, week in and week out, because that's what we do and have always done. And such things can be incredibly helpful matters of organisation, enabling us to get things done and done efficiently; and there's nothing necessarily wrong with them in and of themselves. BUT – we need constantly to be

asking ourselves whether they are still the way in which the Holy Spirit is prompting and calling us to do things; still ways in which God's Spirit in us is leading us. Or is he nudging us to think afresh, to move on, to step out into the unfamiliar and unknown and inherently uncomfortable. We need, as the apostle Paul puts it in his Epistle to the Galatians (5:25), not just to have the Spirit within us, but to 'keep in step' with the Spirit as he prompts and nudges and cajoles and draws



us and be careful not to resist or ignore his coaxing and guiding. "Without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing. We are as ships without the wind, branches without sap, and like coals without fire, we are useless." But, you see, it's not that

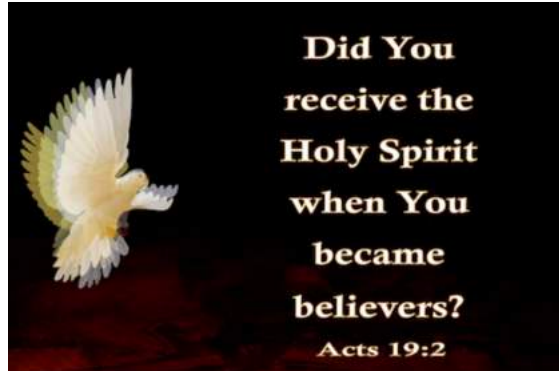
we can *do nothing* without the Spirit; we can *do* plenty, and keep on doing it *ad infinitum*, sincerely supposing ourselves to be putting on a good religious show in the process. But if what we do is *out of step* with the Spirit, if it is no longer the appropriate vehicle for the Spirit's work in us and through us, if it is no longer what the Spirit would have us do, but we are doing it blithely anyway, then our doing of it – no matter how sincere or how energetic or how impressive the results may appear outwardly to be – it will all be '*useless*': useless in terms of our growth in Christ; useless in terms of our pursuit of God's kingdom; useless in terms of honouring God and hallowing his name in the midst of the world around us.

But, of course, we can't be 'in step' with the Spirit if we aren't even aware that the Spirit is 'stepping out' in our lives! We won't be listening for the Spirit's prompting within us if we aren't expecting to hear it! If, like some of the Christians Paul met in Ephesus in Acts 19, we have 'never heard that there is a Holy Spirit!' Of course we will have heard about the Spirit, in Bible readings and the like. We may have accrued quite a lot of *information* about the Holy Spirit along the way. But that's not what Paul was driving at in his interrogation of these Christians. 'But did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' he asks them. And they had to admit that, as far as they were aware, they hadn't. 'As far as they were aware'. You

see, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is part of the basic Christian package. Time and time again in the New Testament, as we have already noted, we find a threefold exhortation in the apostles' preaching: repent – be baptised – *and receive the Holy Spirit!* And each of those three

component parts is hugely important, because they belong naturally together.

Repent – be baptised – and receive the Holy Spirit. 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' Paul asks them. 'Well, no!' they say, 'we



didn't know we were meant to!' It's possible to be good respectable church members, to have been baptised, to have repented and received forgiveness of your sins, to believe that Jesus is Lord – and yet not *yet* to have received the Holy Spirit. Because *receiving* the Holy Spirit is not something that happens automatically or without you knowing it. God *gives* the Holy Spirit, pours the Spirit out in fulfilment of his promise, comes to dwell in our lives; but *receiving* the gift can only ever be an action – something we do and do consciously, intentionally, with full awareness that we are doing so.

Too many Christians, and too many Christian congregations, I think, operate with a theoretical awareness (if any awareness at all) of the gift of God's Spirit poured out in their lives, glugging over them and soaking into them like the oil of anointing. The Spirit is there. The Spirit is here!! In my life, in your life, in the life of our congregation – but are we *receiving* the Spirit, intentionally paying attention, listening for his voice, opening ourselves, making ourselves available to receive ever more of his gift to us? Perhaps we haven't done so for a long time. Perhaps we never knew we were supposed to, and so have never done so. But it's never too late (and never too soon!) to start.

Because the Spirit is vital to everything that we do and are as Christians, as those who are united to Jesus and called to a form of faithful witness to his name, called to a form of faithful living in hope, living in the light of God's promise to come and

judge and transform the world into the place it was always meant to be – a place where God and we can dwell together and enjoy creation’s goodness together. We are called to a life which resists the structures and the forces that currently *dominate* the world and hold us in thrall to themselves, called instead to live out a life in every part of which Christ is owned as the Lord – the *Dominus* – and continues to do so when, *because we do so*, things get tough and uncomfortable. How can we possibly hope to meet that challenge, to rise to that calling? We can’t! But God himself can and does. In us, and through us, and with us – God is at work. The Father sends his Son into the world to fight the decisive battle. Victorious, the Son returns to the Father’s side in glory. But the campaign continues, and we are the foot-soldiers – those despatched to engage in an often messy trench-warfare without which the war remains un-won. It *will be won*, but there is much fighting, much struggling, much mopping up of enemy forces and occupying of enemy territory still to be accomplished. How can we hope to accomplish it with our champion having returned behind the lines to Headquarters? We can’t hope to do it alone! But God *does not leave us alone, has not left us alone, will not leave us alone!!* In the person of the Holy Spirit God himself comes in person to stand with us, to dwell in us, and to fight the battle *through* us. What we cannot hope to do, God *promises* to do. God *gives us the gift of himself* present in us, infusing the life of Christ into us, enabling our response to his call, filling us with joy and peace in our worship, granting us strength, hope, guidance, liberating us from the things that bind and restrict our living, empowering us to do things we know ourselves otherwise to be wholly incapable of desiring to do let alone actually doing, sustaining and holding us when the times of pain and suffering come.

