

Giving in Faith

**A Sermon preached in St John's Walton-on-Thames
on Sunday 21st February 2010**

Readings: Acts 2. 14-21; John 14. 15-27

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“And of the Holy Spirit”. But who is the Spirit? Many years ago, when I was leading a home group on the Holy Spirit, an intelligent, well-read, and thankfully honest couple were brave enough to say, ‘actually, Charles, we’ve never understood what the Holy Spirit was for’ . They’re not alone. A lot of Christians aren’t all that sure about the Holy Spirit; not sure who the Holy Spirit is, or what he does, or what he is ‘for’.

But according to John 14, one of the things the Holy Spirit is ‘for’ is to be making his home in each of Jesus’ followers; because Jesus himself promised that it would be so: *If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

Actually, Jesus starts off here by talking about ‘another Advocate’, which needs a bit of explanation. Throughout John’s gospel, ‘Advocate’ is a translation of the Greek word ‘Parakletos’, as a title for the Holy Spirit. Parakletos It’s one of those Greek words for which there is no single all-encompassing English translation: it can also be translated as ‘Helper’, ‘Comforter’, ‘Counsellor’. The fascinating thing is that in the first Epistle of John, Jesus himself is described as a Parakletos: ‘If anyone does sin, we have an Advocate [*a Parakletos*] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous ...’ (1 John 2.1). So when Jesus tells his disciples that the Father will send them another Parakletos, he means another just like me. And he goes on to promise, in John 14.23, that he and his Father will come and make their home in us, by the Holy Spirit.

As we tend to be a bit choosy about who we let into our home, it might be a good idea to find out more about our guest. So who is this Spirit that Jesus says will be poured out on every believer?

First of all, the Holy Spirit is God, the third person of God the Holy Trinity. And because the Spirit is a person, he is not an 'it', though virtually all of us will have called the Holy Spirit 'it' at some stage. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit was around at the very beginning; his first mention is in the second verse of the Bible, Genesis 1.2, where we read that *the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters*. The Spirit was at work in and through the prophets; one of them, Joel, prophesied that God would pour out his Spirit upon all people (Joel 2.28-29). The Holy Spirit was active in bringing Jesus to birth; when Mary asked, not unreasonably, how it could be that she was going to have a baby, when she was still a virgin, the angel answered *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you* (Luke 1.35). The Holy Spirit led people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, starting with Simeon in the temple (Luke 2.25-27). Jesus often taught about the Holy Spirit, as in John 14; and he promised that the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all his disciples after the Resurrection (Luke 24.45-49; Acts 1.4-9), which is what happened at Pentecost (Acts 2.1-13). Throughout Acts, the Spirit is given to believers either when they're converted, or later at particular times of prayer, renewal or blessing (Acts 4.31; 9.17-19; 10.44-46). And we're promised that the same Spirit is given to every Christian today: *Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him* (Acts 2.38-39).

Which includes us. This is the Spirit that Jesus promises will be sent to each person who believes in him, and who will be at home in you, and in me. The Holy Spirit isn't a lodger. He's at home. When the Spirit comes, it's not a flying visit; he *abides* with us and is in us. He is at home.

And he has a job to do. Actually, he has a range of jobs to do: multi-tasking is nothing to the Holy Spirit. To name but a few, Jesus said the Spirit would lead us into all truth (John 15.13). Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would teach them everything and remind them of what he had said (John 14.26). Jesus also taught them that they would receive power when the Spirit had come upon them (Acts 1.8), power to serve him, and to be his witnesses in the world. And that's what happened at the first Christian Pentecost, when they were drenched with the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit also wants to nurture what St Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit in each of us. This is specially important for those of us who may not, or not yet, have had a drenching experience of the Spirit; we may not feel any different. On one level, it's a matter of faith: we believe the Spirit lives and works in us because Jesus promised he would. But on another level, a key sign of the Spirit's presence is when the fruit of the Spirit is in evidence in our lives. As Paul writes, *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Galatians 5.22-23). What wonderful qualities! And this fruit — notice, fruit singular; not fruits — this is what the Spirit wants to nurture in our lives. And we could go on, because they're much more. All of which can be summed up in a line from the Creed: we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Bringer of life.

So let me ask you a question: how would you feel if Jesus walked in the door of the church this morning? What wouldn't we give for that to happen: to be with Jesus; to have Jesus here with us? I get goose-bumps just thinking about it. But listen to what Jesus says in John 16.7: *'I tell the 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.'* Jesus himself says it's better that we have the Holy Spirit with us, than his physical presence. And that is because of perhaps the most astonishing Holy Spirit truth of them all: that the Spirit is God with us now, bringing us the Father's love; being the presence of Christ with us and in us; and bringing the life of Christ alive in us.

So what can we do with all this? What can we do to co-operate with the Holy Spirit who is makes his home in our spirits?

First, something that may appear to have nothing to do with the Holy Spirit: do what Jesus says. In our gospel reading Jesus stresses 4 times (v.15, v.21, v.23, v.24) the importance of keeping his commandments, of doing what he says; and, by implication, the consequences of not keeping them. Not only is keeping his commandments a sign that we love him; it's also vital if the Spirit is to live and work within us. Look at the sequence in v.15: a) if you love me, you will keep my commandments; b) I will ask the Father; c) he will send you another Parakletos; d) this Parakletos will be with us for ever. But it begins with obedience to Jesus' commandments; it begins with us doing what Jesus says.

Next, *Be filled with the Spirit* (Ephesians 5.18). Sometimes people pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit'; and that's a good prayer, because it is in an invitation to the Holy Spirit to come to us, to be present, to be active, to bless us with whatever God has for us. Which is fine, as long as we remember that the Holy Spirit is already here. He doesn't have to make a long and difficult journey. He's already with us. When we pray 'Come, Holy Spirit', what we're really doing is releasing the Holy Spirit from the basement in which we often keep him shut in, and setting him free to be at work in us.

So Paul encourages us to "Be filled with the Spirit"; and the sense of the original Greek is, 'Be filled, and go on being filled with the Spirit'. It's not as if we get filled once, and that's it. Next time you get a new car, and fill the tank with petrol, we don't expect that tankful to last us for the lifetime of the car. In the same way, we need to be filled with the Spirit, over and over again. Notice also that this isn't something we can do for ourselves: Paul doesn't write, 'fill yourselves'. Rather, we are to let ourselves be filled by the Spirit. It's his job; we just have to let it happen.

Finally, we can trust God. I don't know about you, but I really don't like going to the dentist. I'm uneasy at someone poking around in my mouth, saying things I don't understand, doing things they don't explain, and not letting me know when it's going to hurt. And I sometimes think that we can be as wary of the Holy Spirit as we are of the dentist. We can't see the Spirit; we don't always know what he's up to; we don't always get an explanation. And that wariness can be heightened if we've heard something about the Spirit in action in ways which sounds unusual, or out of the range of 'normal' human experience.

It's about trust. Do we trust God enough to let his Holy Spirit work within us? Do we trust God enough to give the Holy Spirit free reign in our lives, releasing whatever God wants to be bringing to life in us. After all, as Jesus said in Luke 11.13: *if you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*

By sending the Holy Spirit to live in us, God is giving us himself, and God is giving us his life. What can there be to fear?