

## PENTECOST – Fr John Spring – Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2010

How do you picture the Holy Spirit? Or perhaps I should ask, “*Do you picture the Holy Spirit?*” Because the Holy Spirit is invisible to human sight, but has roles and ways of impacting upon us, we often content ourselves with the traditional pictorial symbols – the dove, wind, fire or even water – to create, if not a picture, then a link to a web of associations.

But perhaps you also like to go beyond the merely visual as your link or pathway, and hold the Holy Spirit in your mind as an alive idea, or as a felt sensation, or as an emotion of ardour, love, excitement, joy or exhilaration, courage, daring, heroism. Or perhaps you experience the Spirit in a kinetic way, having a sense of dynamic shape and muscular tension, of power, poise, balance and movement – like a nebula swirling in space. Yet, there is a danger in using *only* these ways of engaging with the Spirit.

Because the Holy Spirit is a *person* and not a thing, it is also desirable to give God the Holy Spirit a human form, just as we give God the Father a human form to help us talk to him. This form might well be masculine, since Jesus repeatedly referred to the Holy Spirit as “he”. Yet bible stories of the Holy Spirit sometimes involve doves, and as the Greek word for dove is a feminine word, *peristera*, and so some people like to picture the Holy Spirit as feminine - hence the song “She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters” (TIS 418) although this is also a hymn about wisdom (Hokmah, Sophia). So some of us presumably picture the Holy Spirit as a woman.

Now it is important find ways to picture the Holy Spirit as a *person* because it becomes much easier to pray to the Holy Spirit if you do – which brings me to a second question: “Do you pray to the Holy Spirit?” If I may be so bold as to put it this way, gods are for human beings to pray to. When Solomon consecrated the first temple, he prayed a long prayer. At the end of this prayer, God, who has been listening all this time, responds, saying, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” During the bushfires, we got to hear a lot of this verse! As Global Warming advances, I think we are going to hear it a great deal more.

Anyway, that aside, God is there to be prayed to. The Holy Spirit is *God* the Holy Spirit, and so God the Holy Spirit is there to be prayed to. But how can you pray to the Holy Spirit if you only picture him as a thing - a wind, a fire, a force, an influence – a principle? The fact is, you can only pray to *someone* who can *hear* you, who listens, and who answers. So, to engage with the Holy Spirit you need to pray to the Holy Spirit; and to pray to the Holy Spirit, you have to help yourself connect with him as a person.

It has become easier in some Christian assemblies to pray to the Holy Spirit. (In fact, in some churches, it almost seems that the Holy Spirit is the only person they pray to.) However, it seems to me that it is still not common or easy for Christians like us to do this. If that is so for you, may I mention that, while we have difficulty *speaking* to the Holy Spirit, we seem to find it very easy to *sing* to him. We quite comfortably speak our hearts and minds and sing prayers to the Holy Spirit as someone who is listening to us.

Let’s take some examples from our hymn book (*Together in Song*).

- From the 9<sup>th</sup> century there is the *Veni Creator Spiritus*: “Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire, enlighten with your heavenly fire: you the anointing Spirit are, on us your sevenfold gifts you pour”.

- Then from the 15<sup>th</sup> century there is “Come down O Love Divine, seek now this soul of mine, and visit it with your own ardour glowing. O Comforter draw near, within my heart appear and kindle it, your holy flame bestowing.”
- From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we sing “Come Holy Spirit, Lord of grace, eternal fount of love, inflame we pray our inmost hearts with fire from heaven above”.
- From the 19<sup>th</sup> century we have a wedding hymn, “O Perfect Love, all human thought transcending” and “O Love that will not let me go”. Then there is “O Spirit of the living God, in all the fullness of your grace, wherever human foot has trod, descend on our rebellious race. Give tongues of fire and hearts of love to preach the reconciling word; anoint with power from above whenever gospel truth is heard.”
- Then, from the 20<sup>th</sup> century we sing and pray, “Holy Spirit, come confirm us in the truth that Christ makes known” and again “O breath of life, come sweeping through us, revive your church with life and power; O breath of life come cleanse, renew us, and fit your church to meet this hour”. We also offer praise, singing, “Lord of creation, to you be all praise”.

It is also possible to adapt many a song or hymn addressed to the Lord as a prayer to the Holy Spirit. For example, there is “Fill my whole life, O Lord my God, in every part with praise”, and again there is “Lead, kindly light, amid the gath’ring gloom, Lead thou me on”. Then again there is a 17<sup>th</sup> Century song to the spirit of Jesus, who, as you know from the Acts of the Apostles, is also the Holy Spirit. This song says, “Come my way, my truth, my life: such a way as gives us breath, such a truth as ends all strife, such a life as killeth death”. One that I especially commend to you is TIS 690: “Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair”.

(We will use it today as a prayer after Communion.)

Of course, it is possible to sing these hymns to a kind of airy abstraction, a big cloudy nothing, a projection into the sky of our own feelings – not much more real than Santa Claus. But if you do it mindfully, one way to pray to the Holy Spirit is to say hymns and songs like these to the Holy Spirit *as prayers*. Doing this is an excellent way of engaging with the Holy Spirit as a person, as the “he” who was promised by Jesus and who was breathed by Jesus into his disciples. St John records for us that, preparing to leave this world, our Lord said to his disciples, **“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”**

This is the Spirit who would stay with us for as long as life lasts of this earth – or to adapt an old saying, this is the Spirit who says, “Veni, vidi, velcro” – “I came, I saw, I stuck around”. Jesus told them that this Advocate - this person who would testify on their behalf when others question our claim to be God’s children - would be “the Spirit of truth”. Yet Jesus makes it very clear that this “Spirit of truth” would not be a *thing*. The Spirit of truth would be a *person*.

It is important to note that Jesus also said that this divine person was someone “whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees *him* nor knows *him*”. That makes him very like Jesus. In the Gospel of John, we are told that “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”, and then we are told that, when the Word came into the world, the world “did not receive him”. The Word is Jesus, and so the Word came from heaven but the world refused to welcome him. Likewise, the Spirit of truth was to come into the world and this person too would not be received by the world, because, once again, the world would neither see him nor know him.

The Word of God and the Spirit of truth, then, have these things in common: they are divine persons; they come into the world; but the world cannot and will not see, receive or believe in them. Happily, *some people did* receive them. These were people who were *in the world* but did *not belong to the world*; people who were *in the world* but *not of the world*.

So, when the Divine Word came into the world, says John, some did receive him and believed in his name, and they were given the power to become the children of God. As for the Holy Spirit, the Divine Advocate, the Spirit of truth, John records Jesus saying to his disciples that, even though the Advocate was still to come, they already knew him and he was already abiding with them. “You know him,” says Jesus, “because he abides **with** you”. But, says Jesus, he was still to come, and he tells them that when the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, does come, “He will be **in** you.”

Apart from Judas who would, as Jesus said, be lost, those who heard these words said were *in the world* but *not of the world*. They were *in the world* but did *not belong to the world*. So the Spirit was already *with* them, enabling them to receive him when he came to be *in* them. The theological technologists call this “prevenient grace” – grace that goes before, by which the Holy Spirit works in us ahead of our receiving him to enable us to receive him. How clever is that! But what does the Spirit do when he comes? Well, he does a great many things but the single most important thing is that *he changes our reality*. He changes those who receive him from creatures of God into children of God.

In Romans 8, St Paul explains to us that the Spirit of God, God’s own Spirit, forms in us a spirit of adoption – or, if you like, a spirit of son- and daughter-ship of God. He imparts this spirit to us as a new reality, a new way of being. So we are no longer creatures, created by God and coming under the divine influence, born to live, die and lie in the dust, but *God’s children*, made so by God’s own Spirit entering into us *to create in us a new spirit of our own, a new reality*. Where our spirits used to say “I am a human animal, an animal amongst many others, and a creature like the other creatures”, now we have a spirit which says “I am a child of God”. Or, after St Paul, “I am a new creation”.

Moreover, in case we doubt or we are challenged, God’s Spirit also comes to us as an Advocate, as someone who *takes our side and argues our case*. He, the Spirit, testifies, together with our new spirit - our spirit of son- and daughter-ship - that we are indeed the children of God. To put it another way, the heart of God testifies with our new hearts that we are his children. Or, again, if you like, the DNA of God says, “These are mine”.

I don’t know about you, but I find that thought simply overwhelming. God has chosen me, out of the world, to be his child. God has taken me, his mere and mortal creature, and has adopted me as his child and conferred upon me eternal life in Christ. And not only upon me. If you believe in Jesus, and have given your heart to him, and you have received a new heart, a new spirit, then it is so for you. And you and I are God’s own children, and brothers and sisters to each other, and to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Fr John Spring