

‘HOLY SPIRIT’ (The Apostles’ Creed – Part 6)

[All St Mark’s Services – Sunday, September 20, 2020]

[Sermon outline; sermon script online with footnotes to passages to look up; prayer]

Drama

[Read Ezekiel 37:1-3a]

These are the opening three verses of Ezekiel 37. And it’s interesting to note that Ezekiel said he was led into this valley by the Spirit of the LORD. But it’s what he finds there that’s more interesting. Dry bones. As far as the eye can see. Dusty human remains. It’s a very eerie scene.

But, of course, what happens next is even more interesting still. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the dry bones- to prophesy about these dead people coming back to life. And then we read this.

[Read Ezekiel 37:7-10]

You want drama? Here’s drama. This is the kind of writing that makes Hollywood producers sweat with excitement. Can you picture this on the big screen? It’d be amazing.

But of course, this is not some apocalyptic sci-fi. This is a metaphor. It’s a very powerful illustration of what God was promising to do for the people of Israel. Deep into the Old Testament era, Israel was a nation that looked dead for all money. They were broken and lifeless because of the judgement of God upon them for their persistent sin. But, God was promising to revive them. He was promising the resurrection of a whole nation. He was promising a whole new era in his relationship with his people. He was promising them the New Covenant¹.

And how would this resurrection of God’s people take place? By the breath of God- by God’s own Spirit breathing new life into them. This is how God explains it to them in Ezekiel 37:13-14.

[Read Ezekiel 37:13-14a]

You see, the gift of God’s Spirit to his people is at the heart of what makes the new covenant “new”. As we saw just now, the Spirit of God was at work in the Old Testament- leading prophets like Ezekiel around from place to place, and other such things. But what God planned to do by his Spirit in days to come was of an entirely different order. And so the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the disciples of Jesus

¹ See also Ezekiel 36:24-36, Jeremiah 31:31-34 (and Hebrews 8:7-13), and Joel 2:28-32 (And Acts 2:14-21).

comes to be a major distinguishing feature of the New Testament. And it remains a key feature of God's work in the era in which you and I live now. This is the story arc of the whole drama of the Bible. There was the old covenant in which God worked out his purposes through the people of Israel, and at times through the work of his Spirit. But then comes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And when he ascends to the right hand side of the Father in heaven, his Spirit comes to dwell within his people. This had never happened before. At that moment, this was entirely new. And the indwelling work of God's Spirit changes everything.

Doctrine

So as we come today to the next line in the Apostles' Creed, I want to help us consider what the doctrine of the Bible is in this regard. When we say: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit', what do we mean? And by way of summary here, I want to say four things.

- I believe God is complex

The first is this. When we say, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit', we're saying 'I believe God is complex.' That is, I believe in the Trinity. I take it you've noticed by now that the Apostles' Creed has a Trinitarian shape. We say we believe in God the Father Almighty. We say we believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son. And we say we believe in the Holy Spirit. To declare your commitment to the faith of the apostles is to declare that you believe God is one and three- one God in three persons. Simon Flinders is a simple unity- one Simon, one person. You could even say Simple Simon! But God is a complex unity. He is one God. We're not polytheists. Christians aren't worshipping multiple gods. But he is three persons in one God. That is complex isn't it? It's certainly not easy to understand². And I'm not going to be able to explain all the ins and out of it to you now. But I simply want to make it clear that when we say we believe in the Holy Spirit, we're saying that we believe he is the third person in the godhead. We're saying that we believe God is Spirit³. The Spirit is God. We believe, like Jesus said at the end of Matthew's gospel, that our work in the world is to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit⁴. God is complex.

- I believe God is at work in the world

But the second thing is this. When we say 'I believe in the Holy Spirit', we're saying 'I believe God is at work in the world.' Because the Bible teaches us that God works in the world by his Spirit. Because he is Spirit, he's also invisible. And so his work in the world is often invisible too. But it's also super-natural. That is, it often does not proceed in ways that we would consider "the normal course of events". So we're saying that, by his Spirit, invisibly and supernaturally, God is at work in the world.

² Romans 11:33-36 is helpful here.

³ See John 4:24

⁴ Matthew 28:19

You can learn this from reading the very first paragraph of the Bible. ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters’⁵.

But the Spirit of God was also there when the story of the New Testament began. Luke 1:34.

[Read Luke 1:34-35]

And of course, when we get to Acts 2 and we read about the Day of Pentecost, the work of the Spirit in the world is spectacularly on display. Because it was in that moment that God was making it clear that the promises the Old Testament prophets had made, like Ezekiel, were being fulfilled. God was breathing new life into his people. And not only into the nation of Israel. He was breathing life into people from all the nations of the world.

And there is probably no passage of Scripture that explains the work of the Spirit in the world more clearly than those verses Tamara read earlier from John’s gospel. They’re the words Jesus himself spoke when he was teaching his disciples what to expect from the Spirit’s coming. The passage begins in John 15:26. And there we hear Jesus call him the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. Jesus says that he’s the one who sends the Spirit, and that he goes out from the Father. And the Spirit’s core task is to testify about Jesus. And to this day if you want to know what the Spirit of God is doing in the world, this is the executive summary. He’s testifying about Jesus. He’s leading people to Jesus. The Holy Spirit does not make much of himself. Rather, he brings glory to Jesus by making Jesus known. The Spirit is like a sharp spotlight- illuminating the majesty of Christ.

But in John 16, Jesus goes on to say more about how the Spirit will point people to Jesus. For example in verse 8.

[Read John 16:8]

The Spirit works to show the people of the world where they’re wrong, and why they need the truth that’s in Jesus. His ministry here is to bring sinners to conviction, to recognise God’s judgement, and thus to come to repentance.

But alongside his work of showing the world where they’re wrong, the Spirit also works to show people everything that’s right about Jesus. Verse 13.

[Read John 16:13-14]

This is how Jesus says his Spirit will work in the world. And we believe that he does exactly what Jesus said.

⁵ Genesis 1:1-2

- I believe God is with me (by being in me)

So then the third thing is this. When we say 'I believe in the Holy Spirit', we're saying 'I believe God is with me. And he's with me by being in me.' It was very tempting to just include this idea in the next point I'm going to make. But I decided in the end that this idea really deserves its own point in the sermon. Because the promise of the Scriptures that God is with us by his Spirit, that he's in us, is just so stunning! This is the privilege that no Old Testament believer had. This is what is radically new about the new covenant- God indwelling his people by his Spirit. How incredible is that?! And I wanted to make a separate point of this today/tonight because I do think there's a risk of us just taking this for granted. But we mustn't grow accustomed to this truth. The God of the universe, the God who made the world, the God who made me- he lives in me. He's taken up residence in me. He's with me every moment of every day because he's come to dwell in me.

Back in John 14, Jesus promised his disciples that they would know the Spirit of truth because he would live with them and be in them⁶. It's in this same vein that Paul describes the Christian person as a temple of the Holy Spirit⁷. And this is also why Paul can say that the glorious riches of the gospel are that Christ is in you⁸. The Bible doesn't just say that if you seek for God you will find him. The Bible tells us that those who seek the presence of God will never be able to escape it. He comes to be with us by his Spirit. His Spirit who lives within us.

- I believe God is at work in me

But the fourth and final point to make here is this. When we say 'I believe in the Holy Spirit', we're also saying 'I believe God is at work in me.' And of course, this is inextricably linked to my third point. The reason we know God is at work in us by his Spirit is because his Spirit lives within us. And here we're saying more than we said in the second point. God is not only at work in the world, but he is at work in the lives of individual people within the world too- invisibly and supernaturally.

And on this point, the New Testament has truck-loads to say. And sadly I don't have time today/tonight to offer you a thorough review of all the wonderful things the New Testament teaches us about how the Spirit works in us. But let me at least give you a summarised version of the highlights package!

The Spirit works in us to bring us to faith in the first place. Like we saw in John 16- the Holy Spirit is at work to testify to Jesus, to lead people to Jesus. And this is true for every human being who comes to trust in Christ⁹. They can only do so because God's

⁶ John 14:17

⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

⁸ Colossians 1:27

⁹ See also 1 Peter 1:12

Spirit has drawn them to him. As Paul says, we cannot even confess the Lordship of Christ without the Spirit¹⁰.

The Spirit also works in us to help us understand God's word. Just as the Spirit worked to ensure the Scriptures were originally written under the infallible direction of God¹¹, so too the Spirit works to help us understand what the Bible teaches us. The word of God is 'explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words'¹². And so, by the indwelling Spirit, 'we have the mind of Christ'¹³.

The Spirit also works in us to assure us of our place in God's family. He testifies to us that we really are the Father's adopted children. We heard about this at our Escape weekend earlier in the year when we looked at Romans 8¹⁴.

And another thing we reflected on that weekend was the way the Spirit reorders our desires¹⁵. And I love the way James describes this aspect of the Spirit's work when he says that 'the Spirit he caused to dwell in us envies intensely'¹⁶. By coming to live within us in this way, it's not just that the Spirit seeks to retrain our sinful desires into righteous desires, but that God's own jealousy for our loyalty dwells in us. The Spirit is God's 'envying presence' desiring within us!

And of course, it's as the Spirit teaches me to desire the things that God desires, that the character of Christ is being formed in me. By the Spirit, we who see Jesus clearly are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory¹⁷. And this is what that passage in Galatians 5 is all about which Tamara also read earlier. It's possibly the most famous passage in the Bible about the work of the Spirit. The Spirit and the sinful nature within us desire different things. But when the Spirit has his way with us, he produces in us the fruit of being like Christ. Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As we see one another becoming more beautifully reflective of Christ in this way, we're seeing the Spirit at work.

But beyond this, the Spirit also enables us to serve. It's the Spirit who gives us gifts that we use in love to serve the body of Christ. Paul devotes three whole chapters to this teaching in 1 Corinthians 12-14, where he discusses all the different ways in which the Spirit blesses the church through its people. In this respect, the church is a complex unity a bit like the Trinity is a complex unity. The church is one body with many parts- all of them different. So we don't all serve in the same way, but we do all serve with the same purpose- building the body up in Christ. And every different act of service is produced by the hand of the Spirit who's busy amongst God's people for the glory of Jesus.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:3

¹¹ 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21

¹² 1 Corinthians 2:13- but in the context of 1 Corinthians 2:9-16.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:16

¹⁴ Romans 8:14-17. See also Galatians 4:6-7.

¹⁵ Romans 8:5-9

¹⁶ James 4:4-5 (where I've preferred the translation in the footnotes of the NIV 2011).

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

And the last thing I'll mention here, though there are many other things I could say, is that the Spirit works in us to grow hope in our hearts. It's by his work in our hearts that we learn to long for heaven. And it's in this sense that he is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance¹⁸. Because we have the presence of God with us now, there can be no doubt that we will live forever in the presence of God.

Discipleship

Well, that's the best I can do I think. The Bible is a treasure chest of truth about the Holy Spirit and his work. I hope my summary of the doctrine has at least whet your appetite to keep learning more. But now, I want to turn from Doctrine to Discipleship. And I want to spend the next few minutes thinking with you about what some of the implications of this doctrine might be. When we say 'I believe in the Holy Spirit' what are we saying about how we actually live our lives? Let me make three comments here before I finish.

- trusting in his work

Firstly, I want to talk about trusting in his work. Because whilst we can train ourselves to see the fruit of the Spirit's work, we can't actually see the Spirit working. Whilst the effects of his work are observable, the Spirit himself is invisible as he moves about among us. And so in this area, as in so many other areas of our Christian discipleship, we live by faith not by sight¹⁹.

What the Scriptures teach, they invite us to believe. And when we believe, we trust that it's true. But because we can't see him, this can sometimes be hard. We can lose confidence that he's at work in the world leading people to Jesus. We can doubt that he's at work in us, especially when we feel downcast because of our sin and frailty. And when circumstances cause us to feel deflated or confused, we can begin to feel like God is far away. But I want to urge you again this morning/evening not to give in to those temptations. Rather, if you say you believe in the Holy Spirit, then trust that he is working in the world to save souls, that he is working in your life even through failures and set-backs, and that he is with you even on the days when it doesn't feel that way. Trust in his work.

- cooperating with his work

But secondly, we need to talk about cooperating with his work. And here I want to direct you back again to that golden passage in Galatians 5. Because right after Paul talks about the fruit the Spirit grows in us, he says this. Verse 25: 'Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit'.

I love the careful balance Paul presents to us in these verses. He doesn't want us to think that growing in love, joy, kindness, self-control etc is our work. He wants to relieve

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 1:22, 2 Corinthians 5:5, Ephesians 1:14

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:7

us from the burden of believing that this is all up to us. He wants us to understand that this is the work of God in our lives, and we can trust him to do it. But at the same time, he doesn't want us to make the mistake of thinking that we can just sit back and it will happen automatically. We have a responsibility. It's to walk by the Spirit²⁰, and so to keep in step with the work the Spirit is doing. And this is what I mean by cooperating with him.

Now cooperation is potentially a misleading word. Because it can refer to all sorts of things. We can cooperate with someone by working alongside them quietly even though we're doing two completely separate tasks. We can cooperate with someone on a project by doing an even share of the work. Or we can cooperate with someone by simply choosing not to impede their work- like cooperating with a police investigation for example. But I think the sense of it here in Galatians 5 is cooperating by following where the Spirit leads. I don't think this is about keeping quiet so we don't disturb him while he works. I definitely don't think it's about sharing the work 50/50. And I don't think it's about simply complying so as not to impede his work- as if we could even if we wanted to! But I think the image Paul uses suggests we place our feet where the Spirit has already trod. Perhaps you can imagine walking down the beach in some wet sand and placing your feet in the imprints made by the person walking in front of you. You're following the other person's lead. And I think this is what Paul means here. This is what it means to cooperate with the Spirit. It means wanting what he wants, following where he leads as he directs us through God's word, and it means humbly learning the lessons he wants to teach us along the way. We're to keep in step with the Spirit.

{And if Galatians 5 applies that language to the Spirit's work within us, I think we could equally apply that language to how we engage with the Spirit's work in the world around us. As he convicts people of sin, and righteousness, and judgement, we look for ways to cooperate with him in helping unbelievers to see their errors. And as he shines the spotlight on Jesus and leads people to see the truth of his majesty, we look for ways to cooperate with him here too. We too point those we know and love to Jesus. We too seek to show them how glorious he really is. As the Spirit testifies to him, so do we. And in this way too we keep in step with the Spirit as he works.

Of course, this way of thinking about our discipleship will cause us to recognise how much we need God's help. And so we'll pray for strength to cooperate as we should. We'll pray the kind of prayer we read earlier in our service from Psalm 143:10: 'Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground'. There's your memory verse for this week.}

- learning to see his work

Then, thirdly and finally today/tonight, we need to talk about learning to see his work. Of course, I've just said that the Spirit is invisible which is why we have to trust it even when we can't see it. But I also think it's possible for us to train the eyes of our hearts²¹ to

²⁰ Galatians 5:16

²¹ Ephesians 1:18

recognise what he does. We can learn to see the hand of God in the things that happen in us and around us. We can pay more attention to the Spirit's work as his work bears fruit. The Bible tells us that the work of God is going on all around us, all the time, by his Holy Spirit. We're just not always very good at spotting it.

So let me ask you some questions. When someone is convicted of sin and led to repentance do we just see a moment of human realisation or do we see the work of God's Spirit? When someone accepts and embraces the truth about Christ do we see human insight where previously there was ignorance, or do we see the work of God's Spirit? When someone confesses the Lordship of Christ or calls God their Father, do we simply see the names people use for God, or do we see the work of God's Spirit? When we notice that someone has a great desire to serve the kingdom and to please Jesus, or that someone has a great longing for heaven, do we see that as godly values, or do we see the work of God's Spirit? When we see someone growing in patience and gentleness and joy, do we see a Christian trying very hard, or do we see the work of God's Spirit? And when we see someone serving another believer in any way, do we see a hard-working and selfless church member, or do we see the work of God's Spirit?

I am praying for myself that God would give me the eyes to see the Spirit's work all around me every day. Because it's when we see it, that we'll praise God for it. And that's where the work of the Spirit should ultimately lead us- to giving God glory for it, to what we're calling doxology.

Doxology

If you happen to find yourself standing in a valley some day and you're surrounded by dry bones and then all of a sudden you hear the sound of a wind and the rattling of bones, then I'm guessing you'll be tempted to run for your life. And if it was some kind of sci-fi apocalypse, fear would be a very sensible reaction.

But what if exactly that thing is happening all around us every day? Not physically, but spiritually. What if all around us every day, and even in our own heart and life, the God who made us is breathing his life into people- bringing them to see Jesus clearly, leading them to faith through adoption, and then causing their life to flourish in Christ-like character and service? Because he is. This is what he's doing every day. He's bringing the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 to fulfilment. By his Spirit, God breathes the new life into the people he loves. And the last thing we should do is flee in fear. Rather, we should run towards him with delighted worship.

I finish with Paul's words from Ephesians 1.

[Read Ephesians 1:13-14]