

Trinity Sunday 2008

Holy Spirit series

I'd like to begin with a picture. You'll have to imagine it, but I don't think you'll have much difficulty with that. It's something I saw in the week, when I was sitting looking out of a window at some trees. It was moderately windy and the leaves on the trees were blowing in the breeze. The branches were moving as well. That was it, really. It was beautiful, because the sun was shining and the movement of the leaves meant that you could see all the different shades of colour. It was all just – moving, dancing in the breeze. Nothing very amazing, except that as I looked I was thinking about the Holy Spirit, and about how the Spirit works in us, and what the Spirit wants to do – and I thought, it's not difficult. It's not difficult for the leaves to let the wind blow on them. It's just about letting it happen. If you hear nothing else of what I say today, then just keep the picture in your mind. And look yourself at the leaves blowing in taw wind this week, and pray that God will move in your life with as much ease as the wind on the leaves and the trees. It's not difficult.

I've been thinking this all week. I quite often find myself behind a bus in Gloucester. You'll know maybe that at for weeks now they've had these adverts on the back – something like it costs £50 to park for three hours in the city centre and 20p to go on the bus – it's not that but

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something similar – the big thing it says is 'it's not difficult'. It's not difficult to work out the better way.

The leaves on the trees. The words on the bus. It's not difficult. So why does it sometimes seem so difficult? We've been learning about the Holy Spirit. Last week I talked a bit about who he is, what he does. We talked about the Spirit breathing life into creation, into us. About the Spirit giving power to do what God all us to do. This week, I want to ask a bit more of the so what question – so what does this have to do with me, with us? That so what is important – it's the question that carries us from theory to reality.

There's a difference, as you know, between knowing about someone and actually knowing them. Last week I talked a bit about the confirmation lessons I had as a teenager. When I look back at them, the sad thing about them was that it was a list of things to learn about the Christian faith, about God. It taught me that I must go to church, I must receive communion at least three times a year, that I must say my prayers. It taught me that I must pray for the world, for the sick, for myself. It was all good, but it was all about me. It was my faith, my life. And depending on how much I put into it – so it would stand or fall. Isaiah says in today's reading: 'even youths will faint and be weary, the young will fall exhausted'. What my confirmation classes did not teach me, was how to receive the Spirit. How to know God and to experience God at work in my life.

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Have you ever heard some one say – I try hard to be a Christian?

I try hard. I'm a priest, so I should do, shouldn't I? But I can't do it. I'm not good enough. Not holy enough. I don't believe enough. And, like anyone else, I'm not strong enough – like everyone else, I fall exhausted. And I remain exhausted, until I remember who I am. Because being a Christian is not about trying hard. Being a Christian is about being a child of God. It's about knowing to whom you belong. And recognising that you belong because God wants you to belong.

St Paul says, all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. When we call out abba, father – when we pray our father in heaven, as Jesus taught us – the spirit itself bears witness that we are children of god. We don't deserve that, it's God's gift. We takes those words for granted, you know – that prayer we pray is extraordinary: we call god almighty our father, our dad, just as Jesus did. We can be at home with him, we don't have to be afraid, we don't have to be on our best behaviour. We can be ourselves. there's no point in being anything else.

What the Holy Spirit does, is to give assurance of who we are. It's not presumptuous to say, I know that I belong to Christ, I know that I am God's child. It might be, if it depended on me. But it doesn't. My daughters know

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that they're my daughters. Whatever they do, doesn't change that. They didn't choose me, but they have me, that's why they call me Mum. We are God's children. That's why we call him dad – our father. St Paul explains this often, [but famously in that passage to the Romans.] He talks about adoption – what God has done for us, he says, is to adopt us into his family: and because we are adopted sons and daughters, he sends his Spirit into our hearts enabling us to call god our father. We're his children. And if we're children, then says Paul, we're heirs, inheritors of God, heirs with Christ. We belong. We have a history, we have a future.

And if we know that, then we can dare to come to God really just as we are. Fallen, exhausted, even full of doubt and fear. I got over tired this week. When I'm over tired I don't do things well, but I do keep doing things - I start to work harder and harder and less and less effectively.... And I am so glad then to know that I am a child of God – that's not dependent on how I feel or what's going on for me, not dependent on the mess I may be making of my day to day life. It means that in all that exhaustion, finally, I can stop, and let god be god in me. I can watch the leaves on the trees and remember to whom I belong – that very solid tree, that stays there through all that happens; and that wind, blows through me, giving me life again and again and again. Forgiving, making new. God's spirit, bearing witness that I am God's child. And then I know the renewing of strength, the mounting

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up with wings like eagles. It's the Spirit, not me, that keeps me belonging, gives me a foundation on which to build – so that even if the walls come tumbling down from time to time, the foundation stays secure.

I have a friend who's made some bad choices. They've had some bad and difficult consequences, and her life experience is pretty bleak, to be honest. And she is so convinced that God is punishing her, that he's written her out, that he has no patience left. And she cannot hear words of hope. And I think if only she could quieten down the voice of her self-accusation she'd hear the holy Spirit within her, because the Spirit is within her, grieving with her in her pain, and assuring her that she's a child of God and therefore she has a future, and a hope.

There's more about belonging that the Spirit does. Paul talks about the spirit as a seal, (*Eph 1.13*) like a mark that identifies something as belonging to someone, like a brand on a sheep. Baptism does that for us – assures us that we belong to Christ. Again one of the ways in which baptism is important is it's not something we do, but something God does in us. That's why I am quite happy to baptise babies, who are too young to know what's going on – but I pray that they will come to know the amazing gift that is given them. For we choose, of course, whether to take any notice of it – but assurance is there.

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It's not difficult. God gives us his Spirit. Breathe in, breathe out. Look at the wind on the leaves of the trees. Pray that your life, your heart will be as open and free to the movement of the Spirit as the leaves on the trees. You're a child of God. Created and loved by the father, and loved and redeemed by the Son; made holy and strong by the Spirit.

Come Holy Spirit; fill the hearts of your people