

Thinking About the Holy Spirit

I had a professor at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies who offered a series of courses over a three-year period in which we studied what various mediaeval theologians had taught about the different Persons of the Trinity. Everything went swimmingly over the first two years: we read and talked about the Father as the Creator and the Son as the Saviour and, since the class was made up of both Protestants and Catholics, argued about doctrine and interpretation. But everything came to a screeching halt in the final year. It turned out we didn't know how to talk about the Holy Spirit. It took a lot of imaginative seminar topics and presentations on our professor's part to get us pointed in the right direction.

I think that a lot more Christians than my fellow students and I have problems when it comes to the Holy Spirit. For one thing the Bible, which gives us so many accessible ways to think and speak about the other two Persons of the Trinity, offers primarily abstract and impersonal ways to talk about the Holy Spirit, for example fire, rushing wind, spirit. Yet as Pentecost approaches our minds, and our readings in church, are naturally directed toward the Spirit.

The sound of a rushing wind and the tongues of fire at Pentecost announced to the Twelve and their companions that the Spirit that Jesus had promised to send was among them. The immediate gift they received was to speak to a cosmopolitan crowd of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles from all over the Mediterranean world and be heard not in their own language but the mother tongues of their hearers. Very dramatic! And it got the attention of

everyone in the crowd. But when Peter realised that he had their attention he spoke to them in the ordinary language of everyday living in the eastern Roman Empire, Greek, without any divine intervention.

Yet I don't suppose any of us would deny that the miracle of Pentecost is not just the speaking in tongues that preceded Peter's words but also their aftermath: Luke tells us Peter's words cut his hearers to the heart, so that many welcomed the message and were baptised. Thus the Spirit speaks in rushing wind and fire but also speaks quietly in our hearts and minds, teaching what to say in difficult situations (as Jesus also promised) and how to listen to God's words spoken by other people. There are the dramatic, almost flashy, spiritual gifts, and then there are the prosaic ones like the gifts of teaching, of assistance and of leadership that St Paul refers to. But all are poured into our hearts by the same Spirit.

The Spirit abides within us and connects us with Jesus and his Father in an intimate familial relationship, as John's Gospel demonstrates. Some early Church Fathers said quite simply that the Spirit is the love that exists eternally between the Father and the Son, thus making the Spirit the 'glue' that binds the Trinity together. One reason why it is so hard to talk about the Spirit is that, as the indwelling God, the Spirit is too close to us to easily separate out and examine.

But the Spirit is nonetheless there, directing, guiding, helping us when we read the Scripture and when we pray. And the Spirit is the source of every spiritual gift, and most importantly, the Spirit bears fruit in our lives. As St Paul wrote to the Galatians, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control". When we see these fruits in our lives, in the lives of others, then we recognise the Holy Spirit at work.

The Spirit works not only in the hearts and lives of individual Christians like us, but also in the life of the Church. It is the Spirit that moves the Church forward into new and

deeper understandings of the Scripture and of the heart of God. The earliest Christians saw this movement in the acceptance of Gentiles into the fellowship of God's covenant people. Closer to our own time, Christians saw this movement in the fight against slavery and the movement for civil rights for men and women of all races. Now many of us believe it is the Holy Spirit that has moved and continues to move Christians toward the ordination of women and members of the LGBT community and toward a new understanding of marriage.

Although we cannot easily find personal images of the Holy Spirit as we can for our Creator or our Saviour, we can touch the Spirit in our own hearts in prayer, in Bible reading, in liturgy. We can see the Spirit at work in our own lives and in the life of the Church. And through the Spirit we can and do, in love, participate in the divine life to which Jesus has called us.