

Talk 2: Who is the Holy Spirit?

Let me give you a business tip! Whenever I find myself overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done, or when everything goes out of control and descends into chaos, I pray what I call the "Genesis One Prayer": "*Lord, in the beginning you brought order out of chaos. Do it again!*" And he does! Try it this afternoon! And you will meet up with the Holy Spirit!

The Holy Spirit brings order out of chaos. That was his first job at the beginning of creation - and he is still at it today in our lives.

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is God present with us and active among us. We have focused thus far on Jesus whom Christians see as very God in human form. Another "person", as Christians say, in the Godhead, another key aspect of God, is the Holy Spirit. He is God present and active among us. How?

God around us in Everyday Experience

I know something about everyone here: everyone here has already had some sort of encounter with God, but many of us have not realised it or named it as such.

Think for a moment. When have you sensed God around? On a mountain top or a beach or on a glacier? The world around us has made many people wonder if there is a Creator - a Designer?

In the words of the an Irish poet, we begin to see "the mountain behind the mountain". That is glimpsing something of the Holy Spirit - *God present in creation*.

Some of us have found *God in other people*. It may be famous people like Mother Theresa or Nelson Mandela - great examples of faith, courage and compassion. It may be ordinary people in the family or in the office. Something about them makes it easier for us to believe in a good God.

At those times too we are glimpsing something of the Holy Spirit. The Bible indicates in fact that we all have something of the Holy Spirit's life in us. One of the pictures of our early beginnings as human beings is of God breathing life into us. All our human rights legislation is based on the assumption that human beings are more than ordinary life, not some sort of mere cogs in a creation machine. Human beings are different. That instinct in us comes from the Holy Spirit.

Some of us have found *God in events*. Many men have said that the first time they believed in God was when their first child was born. Some of us, in tough events, have found strength to face them and obtain guidance to make decisions - and for a moment we have had a hunch that God is around... That has been another manifestation of the Holy Spirit - God present with us and active among us in events.

If you were to read through the Old Testament section of the Bible, you would find references to the Holy Spirit in all these areas – in creation, in special people doing special tasks, and in events, big occasions.

God in Jesus Christ

As we look back we can recall these moments of encounter, but the presence of the Holy Spirit in them can strike us as having been a bit elusive. That is one of the features of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit is “shy” - never drawing attention to himself, always pointing away to what the other persons in the Godhead have done. He points us above all to Jesus.

And interestingly enough, when we look at the Gospel writings, we see that Jesus at times pointed his followers to the Holy Spirit. These two aspects of God’s being – Jesus and the Holy Spirit seem to want to point each other out. They are almost in competition to point each other out!

Christians believe that Jesus Christ opens up to us a new way of encountering the Holy Spirit. Some people speak of Jesus democratising the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit being available for and in not just special people, or some spiritual elite, but ordinary people like you and me.

In particular though, Jesus said “the Holy Spirit will glorify me”. That tells us a lot about the Holy Spirit. I like to think of this as the Holy Spirit’s “floodlight ministry” – lighting up Jesus to us.

St Cuthbert’s is a remarkable church building. If you pass at night, you will see it floodlit. The effect is not to draw attention to the floodlights, but to the building.

The Holy Spirit puts the floodlights on Jesus Christ as a way of God saying: “Give this man your full attention. He holds the keys to eternal life”.

Now imagine for a moment that you are outside St Cuthbert’s at night and with no lights on at all. Before you are many fine stained glass windows. In the dark, they are impossible to see in any detail – you just see the outlines of blotchy windows.

Then all the lights go on inside the building. As the lights come up behind the glass, you begin to see the images of Christ at his baptism, Christ as the good shepherd carrying the sheep home, Christ on the cross.

The Holy Spirit comes as the light to make the person of Jesus known to us. The Holy Spirit is more than a force at the start of creation and in history. He is a living “person” today. Christians understand him to be one of the three persons within the Godhead of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

We have talked last time about the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus. As well as thinking of the Holy Spirit as the floodlight for Jesus, we can think of him as being the “matchmaker” who goes on to introduce us to this Jesus so that we can know Jesus as a living person, not just a fine figure in history.

At this point, let me respond to a comment from last week when we were thinking about why Jesus died: “What about the resurrection?” The unique claim that Christians make about Jesus is not only that he lived a remarkable life and died a significant death, but that he was raised from the dead. Interestingly enough, the claim is made in scripture that he was raised by the Holy Spirit. Let us dwell for a moment on this claim.

What about the evidence? As I outline the evidence, I pray that my comments will be more than just pieces of dark glass in the window, but that the Holy Spirit will bring the light up behind to let the person of Jesus be seen for who he was and is.

A. Three questions:

1. Did he really die?

Answer: Not only was he crucified, but he was pierced in the side with a spear and seen to be dead, and he was checked twice by the officer in charge.

2. Could he have escaped?

Answer: He would have had to move a stone too heavy for four strong women to move on the Sunday, and also to have broken a seal and slipped past a guard. A man in his dreadful state?...

3. Was the Body stolen?

Answer: By whom? His enemies wanted him dead and buried. They had no reason to steal the body and were determined to keep a close watch on it. They saw to it that the tomb was guarded. And as for Jesus' friends, they were too frightened to try to steal the body. And what would they steal it for?

B. Four Strands of Evidence for the Resurrection

1. *The tomb.* All four gospels say it was empty by the Sunday.

2. *The appearances.* Jesus appeared to people in different places at different times - on the day, after 8 days, and over a period of 6 weeks; to individuals, to pairs of people and to groups, even to 500 people on one occasion.

3. *The message.* They preached Jesus and the resurrection, not just what a fine person Jesus had been.

4. *The change.* His disciples changed - from cowards hiding in a room out of public view to confident advocates of Christ in the market-place, from cowering people who would take no risks to totally changed, passionate witnesses to a momentous event. What else could account for this dramatic change in them?

And throughout history, people have bumped into Jesus. Ask people at your table about their story.

That is the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead and is alive. And to return again to the Holy Spirit, he not only floodlights Jesus, he introduces us to an experience of the living Christ and helps us to know that God is present with us and active among us today.

God within us

We have thought about the Holy Spirit in the context of God around us in everyday experience and then in the context of God in Jesus Christ. Let us finally briefly consider the Holy Spirit in the context of God within us.

When Jesus told his disciples that he was going to leave them, he promised to give them the Holy Spirit - not only to be *with* them, but *within* them. The Holy Spirit He can be in us in a special way. We will look further into this on our Away Day when we will hear more about what the Holy Spirit does and how we can allow him to fill us.

Now for a last word today that will interest especially the lawyers among us! When talking about the Holy Spirit, Jesus employed imagery taken from the courtroom. The Holy Spirit within us, he said, will be like a lawyer - sometimes acting as prosecutor and sometimes acting as defence advocate. Jesus said just a little about the former and a lot about the latter.

The Holy Spirit in prosecutor mode comes to us in order to gently "convict" us where we are falling short of what God requires. Ever had a pang of conscience? That was the action of the

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Holy Spirit in your life. See: you really have met him before! He can nudge our conscience and our conscience becomes tuned to God's will.

But most of the Holy Spirit's activity is as our advocate who comes alongside us, stands alongside us and defends us. What a friend he can be. One of the other names given to the Holy Spirit is counsellor: he counsels us when we need not just support but also insight, good judgement and wisdom. You may want to ask his help as you go back to work this afternoon.

In summary, the Holy Spirit points us to Christ who came among us, loved us and gave himself for us. The Holy Spirit wants to help us get to know Jesus today. The Holy spirit is also in the business of bringing order out of chaos - and ultimately, having introduced us to Jesus, of bringing forgiveness out of guilt. He wants also to be our advocate and counsellor.

And the best bit is - this Lawyer doesn't charge a fee!