

Cooperating with the Holy Spirit

A Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension 2010

Ezekiel 36 vv 24-28, Acts 16 vv 16-34, Revelation 22 vv 12-21, John 17 vv 20-26

Last week I expressed my puzzlement that, whereas God gives so generously of His Holy Spirit, the Church in this country is in such a parlous condition. It cannot be that God is unable to build His Church. In many parts of the world, Christians thrive and flourish and the Church is growing rapidly. This is often true in countries where people live in great poverty and the Church has to live with savage persecution. I heard recently that as many as 250,000,000 Christians in the world today face persecution for their beliefs, yet, not only do these Christians remain firm in their faith, but their churches attract large numbers of converts. God does not let them down. Throughout the world God is building His Church, except in places like this. It is astonishing and baffling that it is in countries which are prosperous and at peace, where we have freedom of religion under the law, that congregations are melting away and the *gloom and doom* merchants are asking whether the Church can even survive. I suggested that the reason for the failure of the Church in this country is not that God fails to pour out His Holy Spirit upon us but that so many of those of us in England who *profess and call themselves Christians* fail to cooperate with His Holy Spirit. Not unreasonably, after the service, someone asked me what it would mean to cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

The greatest of the Spirit's gifts is love. Therefore to cooperate with the Holy Spirit is to obey the Commandments, summed up in the words, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.*

Suppose we loved God with all hearts, then the things of God would be the most important things in our lives: worship, prayer, the Sacraments, the Word of God, Christian fellowship. We would understand why Zimbabwean Christians meet together for public worship in the gutters when Mugabe's police throw them out of their church buildings with tear gas and beatings. We would understand those Sunday School stories about people who walked many, many miles to obtain a copy of the Bible. We would understand why the prophet Daniel continued to pray three times a day in front of an open window even when it had been ordered that anyone who did so would be throw into the lions' den. Maybe we could understand how the best of the persecuted find the grace to pray for their persecutors. If we opened ourselves up to the Spirit of God, the things of eternity would by far outshine the things of this world. We all have our own opinions about public worship and how it should be presented, what we should sing, what words we should use, how the building should be decorated, but, if we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we know that *true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him.*

Suppose we took seriously the words *All things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee.* All our talents are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. All our possessions, all our money come from God. Our very life is God's gift to us. The *Christian Stewardship* movement asks people to consider how they use their time, their talents and their money in the light of

the fact that everything we have is the gift of God. When we come to the Offertory in the Holy Communion service we are only acknowledging that everything we have comes from God and, of our own free will, offering back to Him everything that we have and everything that we are, to use as He sees fit. The point about the story of the widow's mite is not that Jesus was better pleased with a small offering than a big offering or even that a small offering would do. The point is that the widow gave all that she had, whereas the rich people, who put much more into the treasury than she did, held back a considerable proportion of their wealth for themselves. The poor widow lost her life, for the sake of Christ and the Gospel and found it, whereas the rich saved their lives, thought they could gain the whole world, and yet lost their own soul.

Suppose Christians in Britain today offered their abundant material wealth, their time, which is so often frittered away on trivia, and their many and diverse talents to the building of God's Kingdom. Do you think the Church in this country would still be struggling?

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. One of St Paul's difficult sayings is *As we therefore have opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.* Why especially unto them who are of the household of faith? Is this meant to limit the scope of our doing good to the Church, to fellow Christians? This is another version of the old question *Who is my neighbour?* If God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New, tell us to love our neighbours as ourselves, whom does He mean? Well, *charity begins at home.* It doesn't stop there. We do have a special fellowship with other Christians. This is what Jesus meant when He said, *This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* There is a special bond between Christians because the Church is the Body of Christ, the Communion (or fellowship) of the Holy Spirit. We are one with Christ and therefore one with God and one with one another. We are members of Christ and members of one another. Our membership of the Church means a great deal to us. The Church is our family. Jesus says *For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and my mother.* Charity begins at home, but it cannot stop there if it is genuine charity, love or *αγάπη*. God's people are obliged to love the world, because *God so loved the world*, but first we love God and then the Church.

That being the case, people who cooperate with the Holy Spirit have a great loyalty to the Church. We are a fellowship, a *κοινωνία*, the Communion of the Holy Spirit. If we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we bear one another's burdens, we build one another up in the service of Christ. We do not defile or destroy God's Temple by mistreating fellow members of the Body of Christ, by putting them down. Our Church has a programme of public worship, social events, evangelism and pastoral care. We seek to support charities and missions. If you believe that your Church's programme is God's Will for the Church in this place, you will support what we are doing insofar as you are able. If you believe that what we are doing is not in accordance with God's Will, you should say so to your Rector or your PCC representatives. We have a duty to speak the truth, but always in love. We belong to Christ and He belongs to us. Our Church is His Church and His Church is our Church. We pray for discernment of God's Will for us and we pray for one another in His service.

Christian people are loyal to the Church they belong to and to every expression of the Church: the diocese, the national Church, the Anglican Communion, Christians of other denominations, of whom there are far more in the world than there are Anglicans. We all together constitute the *one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church*, of which we are a part and we share one another's responsibilities, one another's triumphs and one another's pain.

A few days ago I heard a presentation by a representative of HART, an international organisation which seeks to support people who are oppressed or persecuted or who suffer hardship. It is a Christian organisation which stands up for Christians and others who are the victims of humanity's wickedness. One story was of a Christian woman in the Sudan. We were shown her picture. As a result of civil war, anarchy, oppression and a harsh climate, many people in Sudan are very poor. This woman had a young child who was quite literally on the point of starving to death. She was told that she could take him to a place where the government was distributing food, but only if she converted to Islam. I don't know what she did or what she should have done, but, as our speaker pointed out, we are richly blessed to be in fellowship with people like her. He told us that, first of all, people like that woman want to be remembered. Then they want to be prayed for. Then they are grateful for any material help we can give. We are in a worldwide communion with them, mutually supporting one another.

There is so much to do in the world and we need the time, talents and resources of all those *who profess and call themselves Christians*. As somebody put it, when faced with the enormity of the world's problems, *I cannot do everything, but I must not do nothing*.

The widow brought her two mites. The little lad gave Jesus five loaves and two fishes which He used to feed a multitude. If we work with the Spirit, there is no limit to what we can do.

The love of God is without limit and, if we live in the Spirit, our love too is limitless.

Life in the Spirit is not a burden; it is liberty. It is not a grind; it is joy, joy in all its fulness. It is walking with God, sampling the firstfruits of the Resurrection in anticipation of the Final Consummation in the Kingdom of God. It is what Jesus showed the divine John in the Revelation which bears his name. Here are John's closing verses which will also form the conclusion of this sermon.

Revelation 22 vv 12-21.