

What the Church Believes About the Holy Spirit – Pentecost 2008

Numbers 11 vv 24-30 p148, Acts 2 vv 1-21 p1093, 1 Corinthians 12 vv 1-13 p1153, John 7 vv 37-39 p1072

What does the Church believe about the Holy Spirit? The fifth of the 39 Articles of Religion of the Church of England is entitled *Of the Holy Ghost* and states, *The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is one substance, majesty, and glory, with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God.*

It may not be obvious, at first glance, what this means. It does, however, state quite clearly our faith that the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost, two versions of one name for the same person of the Trinity) is God. If He were not, it would be blasphemous to say *Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost*. So the Holy Spirit does not come into existence at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit exists eternally with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is involved in Creation and Salvation, as well as in Sanctification. There is one God and He exists eternally as three persons, co-eternal and co-equal. The Holy Spirit is one person of the Godhead. He is not an impersonal force or influence and that is why it is usual to refer to the Holy Spirit as *He* rather than *It*. Some people may ask, why not refer to the Holy Spirit as *She*? It is true that the Hebrew Word, used in the Old Testament for the Spirit of God, is grammatically feminine. So it would not be wrong sometimes to think of the Holy Spirit as *She*. Normally we would, however, certainly think of the Spirit as a person. The Greek word used in the New Testament for the Holy Spirit is grammatically neuter and, occasionally, it seems right to translate it as *It*. All this just serves to demonstrate that human words are inadequate when we attempt to speak about God.

We first meet the Holy Spirit in the Bible right at the very beginning. The second verse of Genesis tells us *the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters*. Psalm 33 teaches us *By the Word of the LORD were the heavens made*. Now the Word of God is Jesus. So all three persons of the Trinity, the Son and the Spirit as well as the Father, are involved in the work of Creation. The eternal God creates time and space and energy and matter and these are sustained by His continuing love for as long as it is His good pleasure that they should remain.

The Spirit is the Spirit of the Risen Christ. He is described as *another comforter* (or *paraclete*). Jesus is the original comforter (or *paraclete*). When He ascends into Heaven, He sends the Holy Spirit on the Church and on the world. The Spirit bears witness of Jesus and works with Jesus in all the work which Jesus does. The Spirit is the fulfilment of Christ's promise, *Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*. The Spirit intercedes for us in Heaven. He prays with us and for us. He prays on our behalf when we do not know how to pray or feel unable to pray. The Holy Spirit is God's Love in action, caring for us. It is through the Holy Spirit that we know God to be *Abba*, Father, and also that we acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

We C21 human beings are not sufficiently awed by God. We shy away from the concept that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*. Rather than recognising that it is an awesome thing to come into the presence of the living God, the God Who made Heaven and earth, the God, Who, Himself thrice holy, judges us by the standard of Jesus' self-sacrificial love, we take it for granted that we can come and go just as we please. The Bible recognises that *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*. We can only enter the Presence through the Blood of Jesus and with the advocacy of the Holy Spirit.

The Church of God is the Body of Christ. We Christians are commissioned to complete the work of Jesus. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit and it is by the power of the Spirit of the Risen Christ that we are enabled to do this work. The Holy Spirit gives us the gifts which enable us to glorify God and to do His work in the world. St Paul speaks about gifts of the Holy Spirit such as wisdom, faith, healing and miracles, but he says that the greatest of them all is love. In the old Testament, more mundane abilities – the talents of craftsmen, artists and musicians – as well as gifts like prophecy, are seen as the work of the Holy Spirit. Whatever you do for God you can only do through the gift of the Holy Ghost and, whatever good works He has prepared for you to walk in are your privilege and are to be done with all your might and in His strength. *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father by him.*

There is no problem in seeing the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. It is true that our fellowship with the Holy Spirit is only possible because of the Cross of Jesus. In sacrificing Himself on the Cross, Jesus effects an atonement, an at-one-ment, which makes it possible for us to be reconciled to God. It is because Jesus has died and risen that, through faith in Him, we may dwell in God and He in us. The Holy Spirit works in the Church and the world because of Jesus the incarnate Son. But God is eternal and the effects of the Cross are therefore eternal. So the Holy Spirit operated, operates and will operate in every age of history, because all ages are encompassed in eternity. We can therefore see the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, as well as the New, though we need the New to open up the mysteries of the Old.

Through our fellowship in the Holy Spirit we will bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, which St Paul identifies as *love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness & temperance*. These are the fruits Christians may expect to bring forth on earth, but the Holy Spirit is also an earnest – a foretaste and a pledge – of the joy which shall be ours in Heaven.

St Paul says that it is possible to grieve the Holy Spirit. I think this means by failing to open ourselves to the riches of His grace, failing to live in accordance with God's Will for our lives, in particular, perhaps, by failing to live as members of the Body of Christ, united in love and with a common purpose. In the same chapter (Ephesians 4) he speaks of *endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.

St Paul also warns us not to quench the Holy Spirit, to put out the Whitsun fire. We would do this if we refused to receive His gifts or if we refused to use the gifts He gives us – the time, talents and money, perhaps – to the glory of God and for the good of the Church and the world. Particularly Paul may be warning us against refusing supernatural gifts, the gifts that enable us to go above and beyond the commonplace.

Terrifyingly, Jesus speaks of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost and He says that such blasphemy is the unforgivable sin. I believe this blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is so to harden your heart against God that even He cannot penetrate the carapace of your rejection.

One last thing to think about. People sometimes ask why there is so much more about the Father and the Son in our creeds and in our worship than there is about the Holy Spirit. Possibly, the answer is that it is the Spirit's work to bear witness of the Father and the Son and not to bear witness of Himself. If we really think about it, however, all the clauses of the Apostle's Creed which follow *I believe in the Holy Ghost*, actually depend on the Holy Ghost if they are to mean anything at all. Think about it. *I believe in the Holy Ghost; The holy Catholick Church; The communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting. Amen.*

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.