

God the Holy Spirit

Introduction

I suspect that if you thought last week's talk on Christology and Soteriology was a bit abstract, that some of today's talk will be even more abstract, because besides talking about the Holy Spirit, I also want to talk about the central mystery of the Christian faith: the Trinity. The difficulty in talking about the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit is best known through its actions, and cannot be identified with a human image, like God the Father and God the Son. The difficulty in talking about the Trinity is that it makes no sense. It has been said that no religion would purposefully make up a notion like the Trinity. It's just too mysterious, too irrational to describe. However, that has not prevented us from trying to make the Trinity unmysterious and rational over the past 2000 years.

The Trinity

So before I get into the experience called Spirit, let me say a few brief words about the Trinity. As I said before, no religion would purposefully make up a notion as troublesome as the Trinity. But experience bore out the reality that God interacted with the world in three distinct ways — each way revealing a whole and complete person; but each way also revealing a unified consistent mind, will and freedom. These experiences were not simply of three different modes of God's *action* with the world, but were of three different modes of God's *being*. And these modes of being didn't interact with the world one after the other, but interacted in overlapping ways, revealing themselves here and there throughout the history of the world, and continuing to do so today.

As I said, the concept of the Trinity is incredibly troublesome, confusing and mysterious. And some people in the early Church tried hard to rid itself of the notion, exploring all sorts of ways of explaining away the mystery. But each time, the experience spoke more loudly than the theory, and the Church could never get away from the experience of three divine persons with a common mind, will and freedom.

The Church in the east, that is of modern day Turkey and Israel and points eastward, saw the mystery as something to be desired. And they reveled in the mystery and enjoyed the fact that the experience of the Trinity simply confirmed the fact that no matter how much we could ever know about God, that God is beyond all our comprehension — we will never be able to comprehend the greatness and vastness of God until we enter into heaven, and the Trinity is a constant reminder of that. Ultimately, the Trinity only makes sense as a mystical or spiritual experience: it has to be lived, not thought, because God goes far beyond human concepts. While it agreed with the eastern emphasis on the mystery of the Trinity, the Church in the west, that is of modern day Greece, Italy, northern Africa and points westward, was less willing to give up all hope of logically explaining the experience of a triune God. It's attempts have their strongest beginning with St. Augustine, in the early 5th century. Augustine was fascinated with Greek philosophy and the mind. He developed a psychological Trinitarianism that explained the mystery in terms

of 3 persons with a single personality. There are 3 sharers of one nature.

In the creed we pray each Sunday, we talk a little about the Trinity and how the Son is “begotten” of the Father, and the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father and the Son. That creed was begun at the Council of Nicea in 325 and finalized at the First Council of Constantinople in 381. This was before Augustine began to come up with a decent way of explaining the mystery of Trinity. Since then, we have said that God the Father *generated* God the Son. Generation means that God the Father didn’t create the Son, but as I tried to explain last week, God the Father couldn’t exist without something to love, the Son. So as a very part of being, the Son is generated by the Father. Both the Father and the Son *spirate* the Spirit in their love of each other. Again, spiration doesn’t mean creation, but just like the Father cannot be without an object to love, the Son. The Father and Son cannot be without the divine will of loving, or the Spirit.

As you can see, trying to explain the Trinity is very complicated, practically impossible. But it’s human nature to try to understand the reality that stands in front of us. And the experience of the Trinity is as real as it gets. A wonderful presentation and treatment of the Trinity can be found in *A History of God* by Karen Armstrong. I highly recommend it.

Old Testament Images of the Spirit

Let’s move back to the real topic of this talk: the Holy Spirit. I think that the Spirit is more difficult to identify with than the Father and the Son because the Spirit doesn’t have an image that is easily identified, except that the Spirit is in each one of us, and thus defies an external image. We tend to call the Spirit an “it” rather than “He” or “She.” The Spirit is often seen through its actions, not its being, as with the other persons in the Trinity. And because it is identified more with its actions than its being, we can have a hard time identifying with it.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit is seen through the actions of a wind or a life-giving breath. For the people of the ancient East, the wind was a very mysterious thing. It seemed to them to be something divine, something they could not control, but which controlled them. For the people of Israel, the wind was something made by and under the control of the one true God, who used it for whatever purposes God wished.

Thus, at the time of creation, God might use the wind to prepare the chaos for the divine creative word, just as the wind in nature brings clouds which fertilize the earth with life giving rain.

Or God could use wind to end the flood: “The waters maintained their crest over the earth for one hundred and fifty days, and then God remembered Noah and all the animals, wild and tame, that were with him in the Ark. So God made a wind sweep over the earth, and the waters began to subside.” (Genesis 8:1)

Or God could use the wind to provide a route through the sea in Exodus: “Then Moses stretched his hand over the sea, and the Lord swept the sea with a strong east wind throughout the night and so turned it into dry land.” (Exodus 14:21ff)

Or God could use the wind to bring food to the people in the desert: “There arose a wind sent by the Lord, that drove in quail from the sea and brought them down over the camp site”(Numbers 11:31) where the hungry Israelites ate them.

Breath, too, was a mysterious and awesome thing in the Old Testament, and in fact continues to be in the near east. It was the sign of life, the very presence of life.

Life was a gift God could give or take away at will: “If you take away their breath, they perish and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.” (Psalm 104:29-30)

God, too, was pictured as having a breath. The wind was often portrayed as such. Thus, the wind that opened the sea for the escaping Israelites becomes a “blast” from God’s nostrils. And two verses further on we are told that God’s breath caused the sea to close again. (Exodus 15:8)

The Spirit of the Lord originated as a distinctive way of picturing God’s actions. Like I said, it’s harder for us to identify with these actions than with a human analogy, but there’s some neat things about the actions of the Spirit that we can’t get from an image of a person, and those things have to do with dynamic images of God working in the world. One of the central images of the Spirit in the Old Testament is that God’s blessings are poured out on God’s people through the Spirit. A dynamic and flowing image.

New Testament Images of the Spirit

In the New Testament, the mention of the Holy Spirit dramatically increases. In the NT, the community clearly sees themselves in a time where the outpouring of the Spirit has arrived in full, and they regarded the Spirit as permanently present in the community and its individuals in a way it had not been before.

Until the time of Jesus, the Spirit interacted in the world occasionally, but not consistently. When Jesus came to earth, the Spirit first began to become closely identified with him: Jesus was seen as the unique bearer of the Spirit during his time on earth. No one else on earth could have the Spirit as long as Jesus was around.

When Jesus begins his public ministry at his baptism in the Jordan by John, the sky splits and the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove and stays with him throughout his life here.

Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus avoids all temptations and performs great works on earth.

But after Jesus’ death and resurrection, when Jesus returns to his Father, the Spirit is given to the community as a whole, in a real and permanent way. At this point, the Spirit is no longer seen as simply *God’s* Spirit, but also *Christ’s* Spirit, given to the Church to take the place of Jesus, until the end of the world.

The point at which the Spirit comes into the community is a powerful one. Let me read to you the story we call the story of Pentecost:

“When the day of Pentecost came it found them gathered in one place. Suddenly from up in the sky there came a noise like a strong, driving wind which was heard all through the house where they were seated. Tongues as of fire appeared which parted and came to rest on each of them. All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamations as the Spirit prompted them.

Staying in Jerusalem at the time were devout Jews of every nation under heaven. These heard the sound, and assembled in a large crowd. They were much confused because each one heard these men speaking his own language. The whole occurrence astonished them. They asked in utter amazement, 'Are not all of these men who are speaking Galilians? How is it that each of us hears them in his native tongue? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites. We live in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the regions of Libya around Cyrene. There are even visitors from Rome — all Jews or those who have come over to Judaism; Cretans and Arabs too. Yet each of us hears them speaking in his own tongue about the marvels God has accomplished.' They were dumbfounded and could make nothing at all of what had happened." (Acts 2:1-21)

At that point, in the story of Pentecost, the disciples have an overwhelming experience of God, are "filled" with the Holy Spirit and immediately began to manifest remarkable talents, such as speaking in foreign languages, or what we might today call ecstatic speech, allowing each listener to listen to the deeper message. From this point, the church was enabled to spread out to all lands, from there, the church began its mission. The wary disciples are given courage, the feeble disciples are given strength, the simple apostles are given wisdom, to lead God's vessel on earth to glory.

The activities of the Spirit in the early Church cause it to succeed and to grow and gain converts and faith filled followers. The Spirit builds up the Church and makes leaders out of the cowering apostles who suddenly have the courage and power to make converts of all the nations. The Spirit is called upon to help the Church make all its difficult decisions. And most importantly, the Spirit inspires the writers of the Gospels and the New Testament as they record the meaning of the life of Jesus and the early Church. Probably the place where this is best conveyed, is in Paul's letter to the people living in Corinth:

"There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one the Spirit gives wisdom in discourse, to another the power to express knowledge. Through the Spirit one receives faith; by the same Spirit another is given the gift of healing, and still another miraculous powers. Prophecy is given to one; to another power to distinguish the spirit from another. One receives the gift of tongues, another that of interpreting

the tongues. But it is one and the same Spirit who produces all these gifts, distributing them to each as he wills." (1 Corinthians:12)

The Spirit allows each of us to express the wonders of our individuality, while still unifying us in our work toward the same goal. The Spirit causes new insights and bold new actions.

A story of the Holy Spirit

Maybe another way to express the influence of the Spirit through the faith history of the Church is to look at it in a more poetic fashion.

They should have know that something like this would happen. Every time they got something beautiful in life, God took it away. And it wasn't just one of them, it was their entire nation. Just as they had come to settle down and live peacefully in their land, an alien tribe, called the Egyptians, came and stole them away into exile. And just when they had learned to live in humility under the rule of another government, this guy named Moses came and carried them off into a desert. And just when they had learned to trust God to provide them with all things in this land of little, they came into the promised land. But the promised land was filled with corrupt governments and continual war. And just when their lives were beginning to settle down in their homeland, they were carried off by another tribe, the Babylonians. And just when they were beginning to assimilate into their new land, they were freed and returned to their homeland yet again. And just when they were beginning to think that their homeland was finally theirs again, yet another alien nation took them over, the Greeks. And the story goes on and on. Their sacred history, the bible, was filled with it. Just as they were beginning to feel at ease, their world was shaken. Every time something beautiful happened, God took it away.

And then they met Jesus. Now these were the happiest days of their lives. They saw the world in a completely new light. And their God was more wonderful than ever.

But they should have know something would happen. After 3 of the most fulfilling years of their lives, he was taken away and killed before their eyes. There was no end to the loss. And God did it.

And later, as they huddled in a room afraid that they would be the next ones to be slaughtered, he came back. Now *these* were the happiest days of their lives. They saw the world in a completely new light. And their God was more wonderful than ever.

But they should have known something would happen. After 40 of the most joyous days of their lives, he was taken away again, ascending into heaven, far far away. There was no end to the loss. And God did it.

So they huddled in a room, depressed that every time there was something beautiful in their lives, God took it away. But then they realized that every time God took something away, they were given something even more precious. How could they have been so blind?

And huddled in their room, God came to them in the most powerful way possible — God filled them with his Holy Spirit. No longer was he just God the Father who provided from afar. No longer was he just God the Son who was a friend in their journey. But now he was also God the Spirit who filled their very beings. How much closer could he come? And they finally caught on.

God doesn't just create holes in our lives, he creates holes so that we have the opportunity to let Him fill our lives more completely. Christianity is a religion of perspective. We can either concentrate on all the things that have been lost in our lives, or we can rejoice in all the possibilities that loss has opened up. It's not just idealism. It makes all the difference in the world. And that perspective is what God has been trying to show us throughout all of history. That perspective is what Jesus meant when he said "the Kingdom of God is upon you."

The Spirit gave them the wisdom to see deeply into the present. The Spirit gave them understanding to give sense to the mystery. The Spirit gave them counsel to talk through the pain. The Spirit gave them fortitude to last through the dark night. The Spirit gave them knowledge to enter confidently into life. The Spirit gave them piety to contemplate the beauty of

their world. And the Spirit gave them awe of the Lord to attract them to the Truth. So close, that Spirit. No longer far away. And in that wisdom and understanding and counsel and fortitude and knowledge and piety and awe of the Lord, they began to see their world in a completely different light. It was like a slow autumnal dawn at first, but eventually, the light began to shine differently on all things. No longer did they huddle in confusion and worry, no longer did they grieve at life's hardships, no longer did they give up in response to the challenge. But instead their perspective changed, and they became charitable, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, generous, gentle, faithful, modest, self-disciplined and chaste people. They saw the goodness of their world, and they wept.

What difference does it make?

In 159 days, you will be fully initiated into the Church. But you'll also be changed ontologically, or at the core of your being. You will be different in a way that you can never change. Your soul will be marked with the fullness of the Holy Spirit. And that mark will forever label you in God's eyes. But all that will simply be the official, sacramental conclusion of a process that is already very much alive in you.

The Spirit is the enabler of your faith and the immediate reward of the journey in faith that you have already begun. In 159 days, the waters of the rites of initiation will wash you clean, thanks to the Spirit, whose outpouring is associated with the pouring of water, giving new birth in a life-giving breath, so that you become a child of God, able to address God as *abba*, in the way Jesus did. Once the Spirit enters into to your soul in this way, you are "marked" in such a way as can never be erased. You are forever changed in a fundamental way. The Spirit will dwell in you, and you will become the temple of the Spirit, closer to God than ever before due to the indwelling of the Spirit. If we're really open to the Spirit within, we'll be able to speak with courage and conviction in the face of persecution, to speak with

truth. We'll be able to stand up for what is right, and not sit by idly.

I think it's hard to imagine what the Spirit can do for us. But maybe we can try to imagine people in our world who exemplify the qualities that the Spirit brings. Close your eyes and try to think of someone who has the quality of

wisdom

understanding

counsel

fortitude

knowledge

piety

awe of the Lord

All these people have had the Spirit enter into them. For these things are the gifts that the Holy Spirit brings when it enters into our souls.

Close your eyes and try to think of someone who is

charitable

joyous

peaceful

patient

kind

good

generous

gentle

faithful

modest

full of self-control

chaste

All these people have not only had the Spirit enter into them, but they've allowed the Spirit to make a difference in their lives. They have begun to bear the fruit of a Spirit-filled life.

A Story of the Spirit

There's a story that I heard the other day, which I think has something of the essence of the Holy Spirit in it although I can't pin it down. There was a young boy named Brian, who set off to school one day. His teacher was a rather structured and rigid woman. That day, Brian showed up to school one hour late. His teacher was upset and took him down to the principal's office and called his mother. "I've had it!" she said. "Brian was an hour late for school today!" Brian's mother couldn't understand. "He left on time today. What could have made him an hour late?" she wondered. All day, she worried about what had made Brian so late for school. When he got home, she asked him, "Brian, why were you late for school today? You left in plenty of time." "Well," he replied, "it must have been the rain." "The rain?" she said. "Yes, you see, the rain washed all the worms up onto the sidewalk and I knew the other kids would step all over them, so I had to get them all back into their holes. I guess it took so long that it made me late for school." "Brian," his mother said, "I love you!"

Do you know someone who has a quality of one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, awe of the Lord)? What is it about them that displays this gift?

Do you know someone who has a quality of one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity)? What is it about them

that displays this gift?

Have you ever had an experience that you would associate with the Spirit? What was it that made it Spirit-filled?

Do you ever pray to the Holy Spirit? If so, what is it about the prayer or issue that makes you call on the Spirit rather than the Father or the Son?

Is the Trinity troublesome for you? Is it comforting for you? Is it important to you?

What one *concrete* thing can you do this week to be more conscious of the Spirit in your life?