

## THE SPIRIT OF LIFE

(Sunday 31 May 2009)

*Rev Dr Max Champion at St John's UCA Mt Waverley*

Lessons – Psalm 104:24-34; Romans 8:12-27; John 15:26,27

*When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God ... heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ. (Romans 8:16 RSV)*

There is much talk about 'the spirit' today:

- 'Spirituality' has entered the mainstream as people try to maximise their potential by getting in touch with the 'spirit within', assured of their innate goodness and divinity.
- In times of adversity (firestorms and floods), pride in the 'human spirit' is displayed in acts of heroism, generosity and kindness.
- We speak of the 'spirit of the age' to describe and to praise or criticise the social and cultural features of a particular period of history.
- In animistic societies, worship and life is geared to pleasing the 'good spirits' and warding off 'evil spirits'. Among tribal people it is sometimes said that the 'spirit of the ancestors' is superior to the spirit of Western civilisation and Christianity.

These ideas of 'spirit' bear little resemblance to what is meant by the 'Holy Spirit' or 'the Spirit of God' in the faith of the Church. The 'Spirit of God', who is the Creator and Redeemer of all things, comes to us from outside us.

The Spirit:

- challenges, pardons and renews us so that we are opened up to the world, others and God;
- gives us glimpses of Christ's costly-suffering love for all through people of goodwill;
- enables us to see life-affirming aspects of our age and to steel us against what is life-denying; and
- grants us the spirit of freedom and joy which drives out fear and dread.

This understanding of the Spirit is magnificently expressed by Paul:

The joyful exclamation – 'Abba Father' – springs from the experience of freedom and hope that unexpectedly change the lives of fearful, despondent folk. It expresses the wonder of being accepted as children of God and sharing in the benefits and mission of Christ's love for the world.

The presence of the Spirit of God is always cause for wonderment. The Spirit attracts, enchants, delights and bewilders us. The Spirit refuses to let 'reality' destroy us and instead insists that we participate in the fullness of life that is God's will for all people and the whole creation.

Bishop John V Taylor puts it very well when he describes the Holy Spirit as 'that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality. The Holy Spirit is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware. Supremely and primarily he opens my eyes to Christ. But he also opens my eyes to the brother or sister in Christ, to my fellow human beings, to the point of need and to the heartbreaking brutality of the world and its awe-inspiring beauty.' (Slight paraphrase, *The Go Between God: Christian: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* 1972, p19.)

The Spirit sheds light on events, people and the world previously hidden from view and reshapes expectations about our relationships, the meaning of life and human destiny.

Therefore the Spirit may properly be called the 'Spirit of Life'. The Spirit is opposed to all that diminishes human beings: fear (of gods or others), despair (of oneself, world or God), idolatry (of false spirits), immorality and self-centredness (pride and contempt for others). To live 'in the Spirit' instead of 'the flesh' is to be free and hopeful knowing that we may cry out to God with joy as 'Abba Father'.

It was unusual for a devout Jew to speak of God as 'Father' – unheard of to use a common word beloved of children to convey affection and trust, as well as respect. At the same time, Abba is a battle-cry!

- It is an assault on the 'spirit of the age' that has learned to live with fears, manage afflictions and tolerate evil and death.
- Against fatalism, despair and contempt, this exclamation affirms the reality of divine love at the heart of the universe.

- And, because it is an exclamation uttered 'through Christ', it is a word of hope. The Church shares Jesus' confidence in 'his Father' even in the midst of the most terrible suffering – the humiliation and crucifixion of the Son of God by the enemies of life.

The exclamation of trust – 'Abba Father' – must therefore be linked to the 'groaning' of the whole creation shared by the Spirit. Without this connection, we could mistake experiences of the Spirit of God with general feelings of spirituality. As always in the life of the Church, it is necessary to test the spirits in the light of the Spirit's witness to God's love in Christ. Otherwise, we will follow many in Church and community who embrace 'spiritualities' which suit their self-defined 'spiritual needs' but neglect the Cross.

This is not a theoretical issue. At the moment there is spirited debate in *Crosslight* over the correct use of the Spirit in the Uniting Church symbol. The flaming dove symbolises the Holy Spirit who empowers and guides the Church to be witnesses to Jesus Christ, the crucified, risen and ascended Lord of heaven and earth. This splendid image is drawn from Jesus' baptism (the Holy Spirit as the dove confirms his divine sonship) and tongues of fire in Acts. It is depicted very well in our Pentecost banners and the emblem of the United Methodist Church of USA.

The current debate is basically about the use of the Holy Spirit symbol in other contexts, as in Uniting Church Connections and the Assembly of Confessing Congregations. The issues will be canvassed in the June and July issues of *Crosslight*. However, the most disturbing thing is the use of the 'watermark dove' on stationery used by the Victorian -Tasmanian Synod. Stripped from the Cross as witness to God's costly-triumphant love for the dark world and for a church not yet fully united in Christ, it now suggests any spirit, divine or human, which we may care to believe in. It gives the impression that the Uniting Church is flirting with other spirits.

The difference between such 'spirituality' and the Holy Spirit is clear by what Paul says about the Spirit 'interceding for us with sighs which can't be expressed in words' (v26). This means that, apart from the Spirit of God, we do not know what our spiritual needs are. The Holy Spirit 'in Christ' is to be distinguished from every other 'spirit' by the fact that our eyes are opened to God's costly life-giving love for the world. The 'Spirit of Life' shares in the 'groaning of the creation' which we experience. The harshness of nature (v19f), the horrors of history (v22) and the difficulties of faith (v23) are not side-stepped!

Freedom from fear comes in the midst of affliction. Hope comes in the midst of turmoil and despair, faith amidst doubt, love in the presence of hatred. The Spirit enables us to cry 'Abba Father' even as we 'groan' on account of terrible evil which still assaults the creation.

This exclamation, which combines ecstasy and yearning, is at the heart of the Christian life. Worship is to be marked by enthusiastic praise for what God has done in Christ and fervent intercession for the coming of what God has promised in him. Mission is to be marked by joyful trust in God, active compassion for those who suffer and a deep longing for the end to hatred and the coming of 'fullness of life'.

Our worship and mission are to be lived out in the power of the Spirit who opens our eyes to the presence of God in situations which from the human point of view are hopeless. When human resources are depleted, evil seems to be victorious and God is absent, the Spirit 'groans' with us and 'intercedes for us' so that once again we can put our hope in God's triumph over evil and death embodied in the suffering love of Christ.

Such hope is lived out in the tension between present and future. The Spirit reminds us of a freedom already won and alerts us to a freedom that lies ahead. These are not two separate freedoms but different moments in the one freedom of the Spirit embodied in Christ's self-giving presence in the midst of the 'groaning creation'. 'In this hope we're saved' (v24) and 'the creation itself will *be* set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God' (v21).

As we try to live in this reality as truly 'spiritual' people we must not let ourselves be seduced by vague or destructive spirits which draw us away from the personal, life-giving, death-denying Spirit who, alone of all spirits, lifts our spirits by the knowledge that we are children of God and fellow-heirs with Christ. No other spirit shares in the 'groaning of creation' like this. No other spirit promises freedom from fear, courage in face of the 'spirit of death' which marks the 'spirit of our age', and hope for our strife-torn world.

And so may we say with confidence, together with the Church of every age, 'Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation.'

