

Sermon - the Spirit within

- Throughout the ages people have been inspired by God's creation.
- Indeed in Psalm 19 the psalmist writes:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
One day pours out its song to another
and one night unfolds knowledge to another.*

- I have found that trees tell me interesting stories about how God has created us and possibly how he relates to us.
- When we see a tree growing, we usually think of it as a whole tree.
- Well, we do not consciously think of it as whole, but we assume it to be whole and we relate to it as whole.
- For us a tree is a tree is a tree:
- when it is young we do not think that it is going to become a tree - it is already a tree.
- When it is old and clearly past its prime we do not think that it used to be a tree - it is still a tree.
- Whether its leaves are budding, fresh and green, yellowing, blighted, or fallen off, to us the tree is a whole tree.
- Even when struck by lightning, or deformed by wire fencing, or with diseased limbs, it remains in our comprehension of it as a whole tree.
- And yet, when it comes to people, we often have an entirely different attitude.
- People who have physical conditions which might cripple them and prevent them from full physical functionality used to be regarded as not being whole - though in many parts of the world that attitude has changed.
- Even so, sometimes it can creep subtly into our attitudes.
- And our society is making good progress in the same way with mental conditions - we recognise them as whole people, and yet - are they completely whole?
- Maybe the words that we use and our concepts of wholeness and wellbeing need to be reconsidered.

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- The gospel stories of Jesus show another approach to wholeness and wellbeing.
- In most of the miracle stories Jesus first forgives people their sins - the stuff in their lives that separates them from God: the darkness that prevents them from seeing the light.
- Jesus frees them from the stuff that is preventing them from being whole in their relationship with the source of life.
- And then he heals them.
- Well - he says various things and does various actions as described across all the healing stories, but I have come to realise that generally he seems to be saying: *You are whole - be whole.*
- It's like he is calling people to recognise and acknowledge themselves as God sees them: as whole people who he accepts and loves as they are.
- God does not demand us to change.
- He invites us to accept his unconditional love for us.
- And to accept ourselves as he accepts us.
- And to keep focused on him and his way of love, so that we can be blessed in that way.
- Once we do that, then transformation into a deeper state of wholeness and wellbeing seems to be inevitable.
- Change seems to arise from being God-centred.
- In fact, such changes are so inevitable that very often Christians have mixed up the sequence, and think that we need to change in order to have a relationship with God.
- A sort of 'Be good - or be whole - and then you can encounter God.'
- And yet that is not the approach Jesus took.
- He said: '*Your sins are forgiven.*'
- That is, the things that are preventing you from being able to accept God's love for you have been taken away.
- And then he says: 'Get up and walk' or 'Open your eyes and see'.
- That is, in a sense, 'you *are* whole - now live your life as a whole person.'

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- Now - what has this to do with the Pentecost story of God's Spirit being poured out for all people?
- Well, I think that in a sense the Pentecost event was similar to the way I have described the miracle stories of Jesus:
- that Jesus did not so much *make* people whole as rather call them into the wholeness that was *already* there - call them into seeing themselves as God already saw them.
- And so the Pentecost story - although Peter quotes the prophet Joel's turn of phrase: '*I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh*' - is more about those first disciples experiencing a powerful shift in their perception of themselves that they *are* filled with God's Spirit, and suddenly recognising that and acknowledging that and responding to that.
- Now it is possible that I might be a bit heretical or out of line with my thinking here.
- But there is another potent Biblical image that speaks to me powerfully about God's Spirit.
- The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach*, which also means breath, and wind.
- Going back to the Genesis story - in chapter 2:
the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.
- In today's psalm, the psalmist describes God's creatures - which includes us:
'when you take away their breath, they die and return again to the dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created'.
- So there is this concept that when we are born as babies, we are not properly alive until we have taken that first breath - until we are in-spired by the breath of life from the Source of life.
- And when we arrive at the end of our earthly life the last thing we do is that we ex-pire - we breathe out for the last time, giving back to God his Spirit that has sustained us our whole life long.
- And so - in that sense, in that Biblical sense - we all have the Spirit of God within us.

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- So then, why the Pentecost event?
 - Why are people baptised in the Spirit?
 - Why do people appear to be given something they already have as though they had not?
 - I think it is because that is what it sometimes feels like - that is how people often experience it.
 - It can feel like something new - a new sensation or a new awareness.
 - And I am not going to dispute that, because that is how I have experienced it too.
 - A number of times.
 - And I have come to realise that the Spirit of God that has always been within me has, each time, been calling me into a deeper and deeper awareness of God, and of his love and compassion for me, and of his acceptance of me - just as I am.
 - And into a perception of the world that is more closely aligned to God's perception.
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- The Spirit of God *is* within each of us.
 - Let us, like those first disciples, keep ourselves aligned to God through prayer and worship and attending to God's Word, so that God's Spirit may shift our awareness and our perception, and enable us to recognise and acknowledge his Spirit already within us, and then respond with a renewed and more profound sense of wholeness in God.

Let us pray:

O Spirit, be free in us,

let us not bind you through fear of where your disturbing power will lead.

Burst through our brittle shells, shake us to the foundations,

strip us to the core - which is our essence, and your love.

We pray this through Jesus Christ, who breathes God's Spirit on all who seek to be inspired by him. Amen.