

## **Talk 2: The Holy Spirit in our lives**

It's been lovely to watch your testimonies and experiences of how the Holy Spirit works in your lives – there's so much variety! And maybe that's why it can sometimes be hard to describe or even identify the Holy Spirit's work – because He does so much in us, in so many ways. It's a bit like if someone were to ask you, "What role does water play in your life?" We would have quite a lot to say – and it would be a wide variety of roles. "Water keeps me alive"; "water cleans me"; "water inspires me, when I look at the sea or a powerful waterfall"; "water relaxes me when I take a bath, or wakes me up when I take a shower"; "water helps keep me fit when I go swimming"; "water in the form of steam helps me iron my clothes and helps me to cook things; and in the form of ice it keeps things cold for me": "water permeates my entire body, it makes up so much of me!" The list could go on, but we get the idea. The Holy Spirit is very similar. Powerful yet gentle, dwelling within us yet calling us beyond ourselves; warming our hearts and perhaps cooling our passions. There is a variety of gifts, St Paul teaches, but always the same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4).

St Basil sums up nicely something of the Holy Spirit's role in our lives: "Through the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, led back to the Kingdom of heaven and adopted as children, given confidence to call God 'Father' and to share Christ's grace, called children of light and given a share in eternal glory" (quoted in CCC736). And St Paul teaches two important aspects of the Holy Spirit's activity in us: to call us to faith by teaching us the truth, and to draw us into relationship with God. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit", Paul tells us (1 Cor 12:3) – this is knowledge of the truth, this is faith. He also teaches that the Spirit "makes us cry out, 'Abba, Father' – in other words, He calls us into relationship with God the Father by showing us that we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It's no accident that Jesus describes baptism as being reborn in water and the Spirit: in this sacrament we are called to faith and drawn into the life of the Trinity as adopted children of God. It's the work of the Holy Spirit.

The baptism rite quotes words of St Paul, telling the newly-baptised, "You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ" (cf. Galatians 3:27). Just as the Holy Spirit was present and active at the creation of the world, so He is present and active in the new creation, the life of the resurrection to which we are all called. We are clothed in Christ by His power. This is a beautiful image, not only because it speaks of Jesus as the One who gives us warmth and protection, but also because it shows us His mercy. The book of Genesis describes how, after the first humans had turned from God, they hid from Him because they were naked. In fact, the very first words the man speaks to God after the Fall are, "I heard the sound of You walking in the garden; I was afraid because I was naked, and so I hid." He feared to stand before God naked, exposed, unprotected. Being clothed in Christ means being able to stand before God with confidence – we are no longer naked. Christ has restored our dignity; He has put the best robe on us (cf. Luke 15:22) and restored us as children of God.

But, as we considered this morning, the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit are one and the same mission, inseparable. And Scripture also speaks of us being clothed in the Holy Spirit. Listen to the words of Jesus, telling the disciples that they would receive the Spirit at Pentecost: “And now I am sending down to you what the Father has promised. Stay in the city then, until you are clothed with the power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The “power from on high” is the Holy Spirit, and the Apostles will be *clothed* in this gift. In his letter to the Colossians, St Paul talks about being clothed in virtues: sincere compassion, kindness and humility, gentleness and patience, and clothed in love over all these other qualities (Colossians 3:12-14). We can perhaps hear in these virtues an echo of his teaching on the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which include love, kindness, gentleness and patience (Galatians 5:22). These virtues, which form the ‘clothing’, so to speak, of Christians, are fruits of the Holy Spirit. We must be clothed in Him, in His power. We are no longer naked before God.

The Church gives us a slightly fuller list of these fruits. Let’s listen to them, and as we do so, let’s consider which ones stand out in our lives, and which ones we perhaps lack. By considering their place in our lives, we notice where the Holy Spirit is most active within us. And if we notice fruits that we lack, these are areas of our lives into which we should invite the Holy Spirit to work more fully. Simply to think about these fruits can form quite a useful examination of conscience! So, they are:

Charity, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Generosity, Gentleness, Faithfulness, Modesty, Self-Control and Chastity.

My spiritual director went through a phase of asking me, each time I saw him, “Where do you find joy in your life?” I never liked this question, and I told him that, but it didn’t stop him asking! I preferred to speak about the things that were difficult – after all, spiritual direction was an opportunity to solve problems in my spiritual life and to offload whatever was bothering me. I didn’t feel much need to talk about joy! But the question showed his wisdom. It’s a vital question for every Christian – where do I find joy in my life? This is a fruit of the Holy Spirit! It’s deeper than pleasure, of course – joy is found in fulfilment of our deepest needs, our need of love – love of God and of others. Love given and love received. I think a lot more about joy these days, and I notice it a lot more in my life – it’s always been there, but it’s important to notice it and to thank God, to thank the Holy Spirit, for this fruit.

My spiritual director is blessed with wisdom, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and because of that gift, one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (joy) is more evident in my life. It’s a great blessing when the Lord gives us help, guidance, encouragement and teaching through those around us. I can think of several people in my own life who have had a profound effect on my faith and the way I try to live it, and on my ministry as a priest. I have no doubt at all that these people are a gift of God in my life – it is by the Holy Spirit’s design that they have become part of my life. I give thanks to the Holy Spirit for calling to faith the people in our parish and in the other communities I have served so far as a priest – these communities, too, and the Holy Spirit working within them have helped to shape me not only as a priest, but, more fundamentally, as a disciple of Jesus. And I can see, too, times when the Holy

Spirit has worked through me to help others. Many times someone has been before me with a particular problem, concern, some situation that seems impossible, and the Holy Spirit has helped me find the words. Or the times when my mind has gone blank in front of a congregation, in the middle of a homily, and somehow the Holy Spirit has come to the rescue! It's good to notice the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And when we notice, it brings us joy.

As a priest I experience the sacraments from both sides, so to speak. I administer them, but also receive them. Although I am in the immensely privileged position of still being able to receive the Eucharist at this time, I miss going to confession. In all the sacraments, whether as minister or recipient, I have experienced the Holy Spirit at work. I have had profoundly beautiful experiences of the Lord's mercy, as I have been forgiven by God for my sins, and have heard the words of absolution, which remind us that God, the Father of mercies, "has sent the Holy Spirit amongst us for the forgiveness of sins". Many times I have seen others transformed by the Lord's mercy in this sacrament, brought back to life, so to speak – and in some cases that's probably the best way of describing it – by the mercy of God, given through the Holy Spirit. I notice it too in the anointing of the sick, which I countless times I've administered in hospitals and elsewhere. This sacrament too is a work of the Holy Spirit: "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit", the sick person hears as their head is anointed. In this sacrament, often administered in extreme circumstances in a person's life, the Holy Spirit is often almost tangibly at work.

It's significant that several of the sacraments use oil as part of the rite: baptism, confirmation, the anointing of the sick and the ordination of priests and bishops. The Bible speaks of Jesus being 'anointed' with the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27, 10:38); it also speaks of us receiving anointing from the Lord (2 Corinthians 1:21; Hebrews 1:9; 1 John 2:20, 27; cf. James 5:14). The word 'Christ' means 'Anointed one'. When we are anointed in the sacraments, it's a sign that we are called to be conformed to Christ in every aspect of our lives; and more than that, it's a channel of grace which allows us to grow in the Lord's likeness. The Catechism makes this point beautifully:

"Because the Holy Spirit is the anointing of Christ, it is Christ who, as the head of the Body, pours out the Spirit among His members to nourish, heal, and organize them in their mutual functions, to give them life, send them to bear witness, and associate them to His self-offering to the Father and to His intercession for the whole world" (CCC739). Christ's mission has become our mission. Through the sacraments we are called to share in Christ's work and also given the grace to become like Him, able to carry out that mission. The anointed of the Holy Spirit is poured over Christ, the Anointed One, the head, and flows onto the members of His Body, the Church.

In the sacraments, then, we become 'other Christs', 'anointed ones'. At baptism we are called to follow as disciples, growing in the Lord's likeness. At confirmation, we are called to play our full part in His mission, animated by the Holy Spirit. Those who are ordained as bishops and priests are anointed to represent Christ, to stand in His place, in a particular

way at the altar, in the confessional, at a hospital bedside, and in leading others in their faith. And those who are sick are anointed to unite their sufferings to those of Jesus on the Cross, to share in His suffering for the salvation of the world. It's all about being Christ-like, at every stage and in every twist and turn of our lives.

The oil used in the sacraments seeps into our skin. It does not sit on the surface, but goes deeper – and the anointing of the Holy Spirit is the same. It's not for external show, but interior transformation. When I was a hospital chaplain in Blackpool, the endless handwashing made my hands get drier and drier, until the skin started to break. I think we all know that experience just at the moment! A nurse gave me a tube of an oil-based lotion, brilliant stuff, which I could use to moisturise them. I still use that product to this day! At first it makes the hands a little greasy, but it sinks in quickly, it restores and heals, leaving no trace of itself; only its effects are visible. In the anointing of the sacraments there is something similar: the Lord enters into us, to restore and heal what is broken. We cannot see Him, but we can absolutely feel the effects of His presence and His work in us.

When I was younger, I always used to think it was a bit strange speaking about Jesus being 'anointed' with the Holy Spirit. In St Luke's account of the Lord's baptism it is under the sign of a dove, "in bodily form" as Luke describes it, that the Holy Spirit descends on the Lord. Hardly an image of anointing! And yet Scripture does give us a link between the image of the dove and the image of anointing, and it comes at the very first covenant between God and humanity in the Bible. When the flood which has covered the earth begins to recede, Noah sends one of the doves from his ark to see if it can find dry land. When it returns with an olive branch, he knows that there is some dry land out there, and the flood is coming to an end (Genesis 8:10-11). Because of this, both the dove and the olive branch have become symbols of peace, since they announced a new peace between God and His people. But the dove is also one of the main symbols of the Holy Spirit, as we know, and this dove had an olive branch – from which we get olives, from which we get the olive oil used for anointing. So here, at this moment of peace between God and His people, at this new start for our world, is a sign of the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit: the dove, and the olive branch which speaks of the anointing which the Holy Spirit will give.

There are two sacraments I haven't yet mentioned: marriage and the Eucharist. The Holy Spirit must be at the heart of marriage, since the Spirit is the bond of love at the heart of God, and marriage reflects, makes visible, the love of God. The Spirit gives the gifts needed for spouses to live faithfully, as we hear in the nuptial blessing: "Send down on them the grace of the Holy Spirit and pour Your love into their hearts, that they may remain faithful in the marriage covenant."

The Eucharist, too, is a marriage feast – the marriage covenant, the union of God and His people. In this sacrament, at the Epiclesis, the priest asks God the Father to send down the Holy Spirit to make Christ present, exactly as He did at the Annunciation. Then, too, the Father sent the Spirit to make Christ present in our world. Many of the Eucharistic prayers also contain a 'second epiclesis', when the Holy Spirit is called down not on the bread and wine, which have already been transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, but on the

congregation. In the third Eucharistic prayer, for example, we pray: “grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of Your Son and filled with His Holy Spirit may become one body, one spirit in Christ.” The Church, the mystical Body of Christ, receives a renewal of the Holy Spirit at each and every Mass. The presence and mission of Christ, and the presence and mission of the Holy Spirit, remain inseparable.

Receiving the Eucharist with faith and in a state of grace brings us into the closest possible union with the Lord. And in this communion, as we know, we are also drawn closer to one another. Bringing about unity is a key work of the Holy Spirit, who breaks down walls of division and calls us to live in harmony. Another famous story from the book of Genesis tells of the tower of Babel: filled with pride, the people decided they could make their own way to heaven by building a tower – in a sense, they deny their need of God (Genesis 11:1-9). The result is division, disunity – wherever there is pride, there is always division, because if I’m proud, I think that I’m number 1 – I’m always right, and what I want is what matters. So there is little room for others, and disunity inevitably follows. So the pride of the people of Babel leads to their separation – from this point, different languages are spoken around the world, different nations will fight one against another. The Holy Spirit comes to heal these divisions. On the day of Pentecost, after the Apostles had received the Holy Spirit, they go out and preach, and everybody hears them preaching in his or her own language. There is unity; the divisions have been healed. The Holy Spirit, giver of reconciliation and peace, the One who teaches us humility, brings about this restoration. Several times in his letters, St Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as a bond of unity. “Preserve the unity of the Spirit by the bond of peace which binds you together”, he tells the Ephesians (4:3). And at the end of the second letter to the Corinthians, he greets them with these familiar words: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:13). Our communion, or union with one another in Christ, is a work of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us humility and love.

The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness, St Paul teaches (Romans 8:26), speaking specifically of the Holy Spirit’s role in prayer. I remember one time coming into church one evening to pray before the Blessed Sacrament – it was a couple of years ago, I think – and I spent a little time here before the Lord. It was one of those periods when prayer seems dry, difficult, fruitless – we all get them sometimes. I had been reading through St Mark’s gospel, just a paragraph each day, and trying to use it as a source of my meditation. On this particular day I was to read the story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. If I’m honest, it didn’t fill me with enthusiasm. I suppose I thought I knew it too well, and in any case I would have preferred, at that particular moment, something more uplifting. Part of me wondered if it was worth giving the time to it, given how I was feeling. But I stuck to it and began reading. Almost immediately, and in a way I didn’t foresee at all, the Lord spoke clearly to me. I read these words: “Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Stay here while I pray.’” Immediately I knew they were meant for me, too. At that moment, on that particular day and in that particular state of mind, I felt like I couldn’t pray in any meaningful way. And so the Spirit gave me the words of the Lord Jesus: “Stay here while I pray”. All I had to do was to stay there, remaining with the Lord, and let Him do the rest. He would intercede for me. It was all His work.

Those words of the Lord Jesus were spoken in the garden after the Last Supper. The disciples were tired, sleepy, unable to support Him in that moment. In the Lord's words, the spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. But the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. When we find ourselves unable to pray as we ought, St Paul teaches, the Spirit Himself "expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words" (Romans 8:26). The Spirit intercedes for us; the Spirit brings depth and meaning, brings communion with God, to our often poor efforts in prayer. Elsewhere, Paul tells us that "the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). These, Paul says, these deep truths – these are the things that the Spirit has revealed to us. The Spirit, inspiring the prophets and making Christ present in our world, has revealed the depths of God to us, and His work continues as we pray, making known in the depths of our hearts the truth of God. The Spirit also knows our depths too – He knows what really drives us, what motivates us and in our desire for God, and also what hinders and discourages us from coming close to the Lord. My experience has been, and continues to be, that the Holy Spirit reveals God to me, but also reveals me to myself, so to speak. The Spirit allows me to know and understand myself more and more as time goes by, revealing the depths of my own heart, so that every aspect of my life can be opened up to God's grace. He does this with great gentleness and care, and in doing so He also instils hope, because as I open myself up more and more to God, I can trust more and more that God can heal, restore and save me too. St Paul knew all of this, of course. He writes, "Hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Romans 5:5).

This seems like a good note on which to end this talk, and, I hope, an encouraging thought to carry with us in the final part of our day of recollection, and beyond. The Holy Spirit has been given to us, not to remain on the surface of our lives, but to go to the very depths of our hearts, and there to pour out the love of God. In this way we receive knowledge of God, mercy, healing, encouragement, gifts which bear fruit in our lives and the lives of others; we are conformed to Christ and take up His mission in the world. We may not adequately be able to express everything that the Holy Spirit does for us, but we can certainly say this: the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, is constantly at work in the very depths of our being, bringing salvation, and giving us hope.

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