

Talk 1: The Holy Spirit in Scripture

Back in Advent we began the Year of the Word – an opportunity to discover and explore more deeply the Word of God. I think it's fair to say that it's been a bit overshadowed by other events in our lives these last few months. Yet I've heard from many people that in these days of lockdown they are living their faith more deeply, drawing closer to God in this time, praying more, reading the Scriptures more. The Year of the Word may have been overshadowed, but Scripture sometimes uses this very image – being overshadowed – as a sign that God's Holy Spirit is present and at work. Think of the Annunciation: the Angel Gabriel says to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you"; or at the Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John see the glory of Jesus revealed, and the Gospel tells us that a bright cloud overshadowed them. Maybe the 'overshadowing', so to speak, of the Year of the Word, is because God had a different plan to draw us closer to Him and His Word this year.

This first talk of our Pentecost Day of Recollection is all about the Holy Spirit in Scripture. It's a big topic, and we'll focus mainly on the Old Testament this morning; in this afternoon's talk we'll have chance to explore a little more the teaching of the New Testament, when we consider more closely how the Holy Spirit works in our lives today. Even with both talks, we will barely scratch the surface of all that we could say about the Holy Spirit in the Bible. So where do we start? I suppose if you are reading any book, you expect to find traces of the author's thought as you read – even a work of fiction will reveal something to us about its author. And the author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit. "He has spoken through the prophets", as the Creed tells us. Inspiring the human writers, the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the sacred texts, and so permeates the whole of the Bible. And, of course, this work is something of an autobiography, because it tells the story of the life of the Holy Spirit in salvation history. It tells the story of God's relationship to His people, a relationship which can only happen because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Without the Holy Spirit there is no relationship with God, because without the Spirit we cannot have faith. The Catechism teaches us this clearly: "Through His grace, the Holy Spirit is the first to awaken faith in us and to communicate to us the new life, which is 'to know the Father and the one whom He has sent, Jesus Christ'. But whilst He is the first to stir the beginnings of faith in us, He's also the last person of the Holy Trinity to be clearly revealed (CCC684). It's only in the light of our Lord's teaching, and especially at Pentecost, that we truly come to see the Holy Spirit as God, the third person of the Trinity.

Even though the Holy Spirit is only fully revealed in the New Testament, He is certainly present and at work throughout the Bible. In fact, the first mention is made only a few words into the book of Genesis, which recalls that God's Spirit hovered over the waters at creation. Psalm 103[104] gives another account of God's creating power, and also speaks of the Spirit as the giver of life: "You take back Your Spirit, they die, returning to the dust from which they came; You send forth Your Spirit, they are created, and You renew the face of

the earth (Psalm 103[104]:29-30). Already here we see the work of the Holy Spirit: He is the giver and sustainer of life, He is a creative Spirit. And we can go further: because He is creative, He is love. Trinitarian theology speaks of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between Christ and the Father, and the Holy Spirit, the bond of love at the heart of God, is a creative power at work from the very beginning of our world, our universe. Love is creative, and real creation relies on love. It's written into our biology, in which a husband and wife, united in love, may become co-creators with God, bringing new life into the world. The Holy Spirit is a creative bond of love.

The Book of Proverbs speaks about the Wisdom of God present and active at creation. We could certainly read these words as a reference to Jesus, the Son of God through whom and for whom all things were made. But we can also see in them the Holy Spirit at work: "When He fixed the heavens firm, I was there, when He drew a ring on the surface of the deep, when He thickened the clouds above, when He fixed fast the springs of the deep, when He assigned the sea its boundaries – and the waters will not invade the shore – when He laid the foundations of the earth, I was by His side, a master craftsman, delighting Him day after day, ever at play in His presence, at play everywhere in the world, delighting to be with the sons of men" (Proverbs 8:27-31).

We shouldn't be surprised that we can take these words of Scripture to refer both to Christ and to the Holy Spirit. The great second-century Bishop of Lyon, St Irenaeus, says "God fashioned man with His own hands [that is, the Son and the Holy Spirit]" (Irenaeus of Lyon, quoted in CCC704). This sense of the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of God, working in unison with one another, expresses another central truth about our salvation: that the mission of Christ and the mission of the Holy Spirit are inseparable.

We see this clearly at the moment Christ is made present on earth – at the Annunciation. Jesus is conceived in Mary's womb because she is overshadowed by the power of the Holy Spirit. When the Lord begins His public ministry, at His baptism, the Holy Spirit is there, descending on Him in the form of a dove; both Christ and the Holy Spirit are described in Scripture as our Advocate (John 14:16/1 John 2:10); the culmination of Christ's mission is the salvation offered through His death and resurrection, a gift which is completed when the risen Lord bestows His Spirit on the Church, so that this salvation may be offered to all (John 20:22-23; Acts 1:8). To this day, and to the end of time, it remains the Holy Spirit's work to offer Christ and His gifts to us, so that we may receive the salvation He won for us on the Cross.

It's always been the work of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus present. He did so at the Annunciation, when Jesus descended to earth to take on human nature and live as one of us. He continues to do so today, in all of the sacraments, as Jesus comes to meet us in these gifts. He makes Jesus, the Word of God, present whenever the Bible is read with faith. There's a lovely phrase in the Catechism which expresses this beautifully; it says, "When the Father sends His Word, He always sends His Breath." Our breath is what carries the sound of our words; in the same way, the Holy Spirit, the Breath of God, is what carries the Word of God to us. Without His inspiration, we cannot hear, receive, believe or live by the Word

of God. It is the Spirit which enables us to receive words from a page and allow them to be received as the living Word of God. As the Catechism reminds us, ours is not a “religion of the book”, as though the written word were enough; ours is a religion of the Word of God, “which is not ‘a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living’” (CCC108, quoting St Bernard of Clairvaux). But if that’s to happen, this Word must be alive in us – it’s the power of the Holy Spirit, living in us, who allows the Word of God to take flesh in the lives of His people today. The Holy Spirit, the Breath of God, is what allows the written word to be a Word that does not remain on the page, but is proclaimed and lived by God’s people.

For many centuries before Christ came to earth, God awakened in His people a sense of expectation. They learnt to believe that God would send a Saviour; they lived in hope of seeing the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. Through the inspired teaching of the prophets, they learnt to await this promised Saviour, living with expectation that God would decisively break into our world and free us. It’s that hope which comes through so clearly in the words of Simeon, who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, went to the Temple as Jesus was presented there, and spoke his famous hymn of thanksgiving: “At least, all-powerful Master, You give leave to Your servant to go in peace, according to Your promise. For my eyes have seen Your salvation...” (Luke 2:29-30). Simeon embodies all the people who, inspired by the Spirit, have lived in hope of seeing the Messiah. But there is another line of expectation in the Old Testament, a further promise of God: the promise of the new Spirit that God would give. Since the mission of the Son and the Spirit would be inseparable, the promise of these gifts was also made together.

This Spirit is given in the first place to the Messiah, the Christ, Himself: the prophet Isaiah speaks of it in one of his most famous passages: “A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse, a scion thrusts from His roots: on Him the spirit of the Lord rests, a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and power, a spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:1-2). This prophecy, from which we know of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, proclaims that God will send the Messiah, the Christ, from the descendants of Jesse, and this Spirit will rest on Him. A later prophecy of Isaiah puts it even more plainly, speaking of the Christ, the ‘Anointed One’, being anointed with the Spirit of the Lord. Jesus Himself picks up this prophecy and refers it to Himself at the start of His ministry:

Jesus came to Nazara, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written:

The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for He has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor;
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free,

to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, 'This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.' (Luke 4:16-21)

So we can see how Jesus, anointed with the Holy Spirit at His baptism, is confirmed as the Christ, the Anointed One, filled with the Spirit of God. But the Old Testament prophecies don't just speak of the Messiah receiving this Spirit – instead, they suggest that all God's people will be granted their share in the Spirit. Let's hear some of these promises:

From the prophet Joel (3:1):

"Thus says the Lord: 'I will pour out my spirit on all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men see visions.'"

From Ezekiel (36:26-27; see also 11:18):

"I shall give you a new heart, and put a new Spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my Spirit in you, and make you keep my laws and sincerely respect my observances."

Through Joel, God makes the promise that His people will be a prophetic voice in the world, witnessing to Him and calling others to faith; and in the text from Ezekiel, the Lord promises to place in our hearts the Spirit who will teach us to follow God's ways not as a duty or as a burden, but whole-heartedly, out of love for everything the Lord teaches. This Spirit allows us to live our part in the New Covenant given by Jesus at the Last Supper, the Covenant sealed in His Blood and renewed in the Eucharist; the Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah:

"See, the days are coming – it is the Lord who speaks – when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel (and the House of Judah), but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine, so I had to show them who was master. It is the Lord who speaks. No, this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel when those days arrive – it is the Lord who speaks. Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people. There will be no further need for neighbour to try to teach neighbour, or brother to say to brother, 'Learn to know the Lord!' No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest – it is the Lord who speaks – since I will forgive their iniquity and never call their sin to mind."

(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

So the promises of God speak of His Law being written into our hearts by His Spirit. And there's a beautiful way in which God ties all this together in the inspired words of Scripture. In Exodus 31:18, it says that the two Tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of the Law revealed by God, were "tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God." This implies that God Himself inscribed the stone, but there's also a deeper meaning. Sacred Tradition speaks of the Holy Spirit as the 'finger of God' – the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* – Come,

Creator Spirit – calls the Holy Spirit the ‘finger of God’s right hand’. Jesus Himself implies this in the Gospel, when He speaks of casting out devils with “the finger of God” – the Holy Spirit is the One who casts out the evil spirits who possess people. The tablets of the Law are inscribed by the finger of God, not only in a literal sense, but also in the sense that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit, the finger of God, who teaches us to follow the Lord’s ways.

But words on tablets of stone are ultimately just words, in the same way that words on the pages of the Bible are just words until they are received with faith and lived out in love. We are not a people of the Book; we are a people of the Word. And so the words of the tablets of stone, inscribed by the finger of God, must be inscribed in our hearts too. This is exactly what St Paul teaches. He writes to the believers in Corinth, speaking of them as a letter from Christ, “not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on the tablets of your living hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3). The Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, writes the Law of God on our hearts, taking the hearts of stone from our bodies, and giving us hearts of flesh to live God’s Law of love. This is the new Covenant, which at its heart has the new commandment of Christ: “Love one another, as I have loved you”.

There is another example in Scripture of words inscribed by the finger of God. It’s a very beautiful story of God’s mercy and compassion, recorded in the Gospel according to St John (8:1-12). A woman has been caught committing adultery, and she is dragged before Jesus in the Temple, ashamed, frightened and threatened with death. This is the famous story in which the Lord tells her accusers, “If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” But before He speaks these famous words, He bends down and begins writing on the ground with His finger. The finger of God, writing in the dust of the earth. And perhaps it is this writing, as well as His words, which persuade this poor woman’s accusers to walk away silently, one by one. We don’t know what the Lord wrote on the ground, but we do know that as He did so, the Lord was instilling something within these people. The finger of God, writing in the dust of the earth, was actually writing in the desert of the human heart. Hearts which were arid, devoid of love; He wrote on the ground, in the dust, as if to say, “Your hearts are as dry and lifeless as this dust; but the Holy Spirit, the finger of God, can write even there, can instil love even there.” The Spirit of God had already given life before where there was once only dust; now He gives life again.

Where our hearts are dry, where there is little love and little life, we need the Holy Spirit to instil these gifts, to allow us to receive and respond to the love of God, like dry ground soaking up water being poured over it, so that it may become fertile ground to give life to others. In truth, we thirst for the Holy Spirit, as Jesus teaches. St John records for us:

“On the last day and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood there and cried out:
‘If any man is thirsty, let him come to me!

Let the man come and drink who believes in me!’

As scripture says: From his breast shall flow fountains of living water.

He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified.” (John 7:37-39).

As we approach the last day of the Easter festival, let's hear these words again – if we find ourselves thirsty, let us come and drink of His Spirit, the 'fountains of living water' which come from His heart. Let's pray for the renewal of the Spirit in our lives as we make this Day of Recollection and prepare to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. During the day, let's take time to ask the Lord to show us what graces we really need, which areas of our hearts and lives are arid ground, thirsting for Him and unable to sustain and give life unless we receive His Spirit. And let's pray that the Spirit will touch every part of our lives with His grace.

I mentioned that the Holy Spirit is spoken of very early in Scripture, in the first few words of Genesis. And at the other end of salvation history, in the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible, the Spirit also plays a key role. We hear it in the letters sent to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2:1-3:22). Seven times we are encouraged: "If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches". The Spirit continues to speak to us, today. Let us have ears to listen, hearts to receive. And let us unite our will with that of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us to long for Christ to be at the centre of our lives. At the very end of the Bible, we hear the words, "The Spirit and the Bride [the Church] say, 'Come'. Let everyone who hears answer, 'Come'. Then let all who are thirsty come: all who want it may have the water of life, and have it for free" (Revelation 22:17). This final image of Scripture speaks of our destiny: our wills perfectly united with that of Jesus, longing for Him; desiring to receive from Him the water of life.

Mary, who embodies the whole Church, is sometimes called the 'spouse of the Holy Spirit'. Just as she longed for the birth of her Son, she also longed for the gift of His Spirit at Pentecost, joining in continuous prayer with the Apostles and the holy women in the days after the Lord's Ascension. As we enter into a quiet time of prayer now, let us entrust ourselves to Our Lady's intercession on this day, that her prayers may be for us, as they were for the first disciples, the preparation for a renewal of the Holy Spirit's gifts in our lives.

Fr Andrew Allman

