

EPHESIANS 5:11-21
BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

It is guaranteed to steal the headlines – say something about alcohol! There are new rules and regulations about the sale of alcohol that have come into force this week; the Scottish Government has announced plans to introduce a minimum pricing for alcohol in its new legislative programme. All of this happens because the abuse of alcohol is a huge problem in Scotland. It is part of our culture and when it goes to excess, it creates problems. We have all seen the television pictures of young people staggering around, out of control, in the city centres late at night; or people fighting in the streets amongst themselves or with the police because they are under the influence of alcohol. It makes us lose control; we lose some of our inhibitions under its influence, we say things we would never normally say; we are no longer in complete control of our faculties, we can't walk in straight line.

Some would argue that alcohol makes them come alive, precisely because they throw off these inhibitions and do things they never normally do. There are people who spend their week working hard, with long hours, under pressure and at the weekend they throw all of that off and go on a binge; they would say that they come alive in new way, in a different way, because life is wonderful for these few hours. The only thing is, these binges store up huge problems. What does that kind of binge do to their bodies? Alcohol is a depressant rather than a stimulant, so there is a coming down from that coming alive, the hangover!

We are going to see in a moment how Paul paints a contrast between this kind of life and the real coming alive under the influence of the Spirit, but that in itself creates a confusion in our minds and in some a suspicion of this whole Spirit-thing. The Bible describes God in three ways: He is the Father; Jesus is the Son; the Spirit is God in us. Some have suggested that to be filled with the Spirit is like being drunk; we are no longer in control of our faculties and that somehow this is an ecstatic, out-of-mind experience. I have to say, that this is not what Paul says about the work of the Spirit. One of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control, the exact opposite of what it means to be drunk. So let's be careful how we go today, that we understand the contrast that Paul gives us and not misunderstand his picture. There is nothing to be suspicious about when talk of the Spirit; the Spirit is simply God in us, Christ in us; so we come alive in a new way.

In Ephesians 5, Paul is telling us how to live life as Christians in the world; we saw last time in the first part of chapter 5 that he wants us to live lives that are shaped and moulded by God, learning to imitate our Father, learning to be like Christ. Here, today he introduces us to the influence and the impact of the Spirit of God on our lives, especially in Church life. We are to learn to be like God, to copy Christ; now we are to learn to be filled with the Spirit and see how the Spirit changes the way we live and especially the life of the Church together. Paul does this by 2 commands and 4 participles that follow on from these commands: *"Do not..." (5:18-21)* The NIV hides this: 2 commands are clear: "Do not..." and then following on from that filling of Spirit, Paul links 'speaking', 'singing', 'thanking', 'submitting' as ways of life that follow on from being filled with the Spirit.

The first command: *"Do not..." (v18a)* We said last time, because Paul has already said, that there are things that are inappropriate for Christians to do. This is not a blanket ban on alcohol, but Paul is clear that it is just not right or good for Christians to get drunk. Wine was a huge part of first century culture; Roman society was torn apart in end by over-indulgence in alcohol and sex; society fell apart because it. It is not that hard to see why, when we look at the society in which we live today. There

have been all kinds of stories recently of young people behaving atrociously and when read these stories more closely we discover that this behaviour is fuelled by cheap alcohol, cider, buckfast; we are storing up for ourselves all kinds of problems by this kind of over-indulgence and all in the name of having a good time!. The Christian is to be wise and careful in all that he/she does in life and the way in which we use and enjoy alcohol is one of them and not to be drunk. Christians are not immune from the pressures and forces of addiction; so it is not as simple as we might like to think and this is neither the Bible nor the Church being a kill-joy, but this is all about wise, careful, Christ-like living that light of Christ may shine through us to our troubled world. The first command – don't get drunk!

The second command: "*be filled...*" (v.18b) Here is the contrast: 'instead' of being under the influence of alcohol we are to live under the influence of the Spirit. That is where the connection ends. There is a complete contrast between the two commands. As we said earlier, the Spirit was poured out on Christians on the Day of Pentecost; that was a definitive moment in the life of the Church, but that was not it as far as Peter was concerned or the Church was concerned. There are two kinds of commands in Greek: one is a once-for-all command, in the aorist tense; the second is a continuing command, in the present tense; the command "be filled" is a present tense command so it something that is continuing, ongoing, something that Christians need to keep doing; "Let the Spirit fill you" (NEB)

This summer my garden has produced a wonderful crop of sweet peas; they are glorious flowers and great colours and amazing perfume. You need to keep cutting them; the more you cut them, the more flowers they produce. So we cut the flowers and put them into a vase and fill the vase with water. But the flowers drink the water; they pull up the water in vase into their stems to stay alive. So the next day you need to go back and fill the vase up again because the water has gone down. I have filled it once, but I need to keep filling it up to keep the flowers alive. The Christian needs to keep being filled with the Spirit; the Christian needs to keep asking God to fill us with His Spirit so that we are able to continue in our faith. Being filled with the Spirit is not a one-off ecstatic experience in which we lose our mind temporarily; being filled with the Spirit is a constant need for the Christian to have resources of power, strength, love and grace, so that we can live wise, careful, self-controlled lives.

We read Ezekiel's wonderful picture of the dry bones coming alive. It is a vision of a valley full of dry bones and the prophet is told to speak to the bones, to command them to come together and they do come together, but they are still dead. Then he is told to pray that breath come into these bones and in answer to his prayers, breath does come and these bones come alive. So prophet's vision ends: "*I will...*" (Ezk 37:14a) This vision is a picture of the people of Israel coming alive again, alive in faith and love for the Lord and for one another and they come alive as the Spirit of the Lord is poured into their hearts. We can know in our heads all that is true about the gospel; we can know that Church is a good thing to come to; can know all kinds of Bible knowledge, but it is the Spirit who makes all of that come alive for us. It is the Spirit who gives us a passion for God, a deep love for the Church and for one another; it is the Spirit who creates the desire in us to pray and study the Bible more and to live life in Jesus' way; it is the Spirit who makes us come alive in this way, so that we are the people God wants of us; being filled with the Spirit over and over again gives us the resources to keep that passion alive, to keep faith and love alive; without the Spirit's power and strength, we can do nothing.

There are four ways in which Spirit's work is seen in us and in Church, ordinary, every day ways, represented by four participles; the NIV hides this by making each of

these separate sentences, but really these are four results of being filled with the Spirit:

Speaking – “*Speak to...*” (v19a) Christians are to take an interest in one another, to help and encourage one another in faith and life. We can use all the resources of the Church and Christian tradition to do that, whether a Bible passage, or the words of a hymn or a prayer. Sometimes people don't want spoken to, but the Spirit inspires us to love and care for one another. This is why Churches have a long and honourable tradition of what we call 'pastoral care' because we see the need to encourage and care for one another in Christian faith and life; let's not lose that and let's keep speaking to one another.

Singing – “*Sing and...*” (v19b) Singing in Church comes from the heart, or should! The Spirit gives us the desire to sing. This is not about being tuneful, nor the technicalities of harmony singing, but is about people who use the words of the songs and hymns to give vent to a heart-felt joy in the Lord; singing is a Spirit-inspired celebration of what God has done for us in Christ, or should be. This is not something we do on our own, but we do it together and rejoice together.

Thanking – “*Always giving...*” (v20) this is not some kind of 'glib cheerfulness' but neither are we to live life grumbling all time. Do you remember Victor Meldrew? All he did in life was grumble and complain; he only saw problems; we watch that TV programme and laugh at him; but it is so easy to turn into Victor Meldrew, to grumble and complain. Christians have an immense amount to thank God for and even when life is hard for us there is a time to remember the blessings of God and the love of God.

Submitting – “*Submit to...*” (v21) This is a bit different; it is all about our relationships with one another and Paul will go on to show how this works out in marriage, family life, and work relationships, but here is the general principle; the Spirit's influence on our relationships is to submit to one another. The Spirit is a humble Spirit; when the Spirit is at work in us we begin to display the gentleness and meekness of Christ in our dealings with one another; He is not a Spirit of pride or arrogance, of oneness, but of love, humility, care.

Dr Martin Lloyd Jones was the minister of Westminster Chapel in London for 30 years; for two years on a Sunday morning he preached on Ephesians and on our passage he preached a sermon called 'The Stimulus of the Spirit'; we end with some of it. "What does He stimulate? He stimulates our every faculty. He stimulates the mind and the intellect... He stimulates the heart also... The Spirit's influence is something that moves and stimulates the will. .. The Christian is someone whose mind is expanding, whose heart is moved and enlarged. And he wants to do something, he wants to make a contribution, he wants to extend the confines of the Kingdom of God, he wants others to share in it. It affects the whole of the person, intellect, emotions, and will. What a stimulus!" We are never finished with this; we have never done it all; we never know it all. Day by day, our prayer needs to be: "Let me be filled with Your Spirit, Lord". Be filled and God will give us new awareness of His love, peace, joy; He will give us a deeper awareness of one another; we need to go on being filled for there is much, much more to come.