

JOHN 14:15-27
THE SPIRIT – IN US AND WITH US

These are big questions:

Can you help me be a good person and live life like Jesus wants me to?

Can you teach me everything I need to know about God?

Can you go with me wherever I go and help me deal with everything life throws at me?

These are foundation-of-life kind of questions; questions that help us know what life is all about. These are the kind of questions that people asked Jesus when He was around; they are the kind of questions that people still ask, though they don't always bring them to Church now, they don't always see the Church as the place to ask these questions, though for me, the Church is the place where you get the best answers. These are great questions to ask on a Sunday morning at the beginning of a sermon because God has answered them; God has said 'yes' to all of them!

Today is Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost has always been an important marker in the life of God's people. It was Harvest time for the Old Testament people of God, called the Feast of Weeks, the time when people came to the Temple in Jerusalem for their harvest thanksgiving celebration and brought their offerings of crops and worship to God. Then 50 days (that's what the word Pentecost means!) after Jesus' death and resurrection, it became even more important as the time when God poured out His Spirit on the Church. Acts 2 tells story and there we have Luke trying to describe something beyond words. He says to his readers: "You know what the wind sounds like; well, there was a noise a bit like rushing of wind; it wasn't the wind, but it sounded like the wind. You know what fire looks like; well, there was something that looked a bit like flames of fire; it wasn't quite but it looked like it." This was God giving His Spirit, invisible, powerful, transforming, to equip and energise the Church for the mission to which Jesus had already commissioned them.

This can be hard to understand. We know God as Father because that's a picture we can relate to quite easily even if we don't always get it right. Jesus was a real person, a human being, flesh and blood, and we can relate to that as well, because He's just like us. But the Spirit is not so easy to define, or to understand. Perhaps the simplest way is this quote from James Dunn: "He continues the work of Jesus; indeed... he continues the presence of Jesus... In short, the (Spirit) is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent.... The (Spirit) is the immediate link between Jesus and His disciples in every generation" (*Jesus and Spirit p.350f*) An unseen influence, as may be, but the Spirit's work is to bring the presence of Jesus to us and is to continue the work of Jesus in the world. We may not be able to see the Spirit, but He lives in us and around us and continues Jesus work in us.

Pentecost was God completing the promise that Jesus made. In the upper room, on the night before He died, Jesus makes a promise: "*I will...*" (14:16f) It had been a long-standing promise that God had made, to pour out His Spirit on His people in a new way, rather like promise of Joel in song we were singing earlier and the words of Isaiah 44 with which we began the service and here Jesus makes it again to His disciples; the Father will give the Spirit to live in the friends of Jesus. Jesus describes the work of the Spirit in several ways, ways that begin to answer the questions we asked at the beginning. The promise was not just a one-off promise for one day in the life of the Church, but a permanent promise that God made, so that the Church always has the gift of the Spirit with us and in us; there has never been a time in the life of the Church when the Spirit was not present; this is a promise for every Christian and there is never a Christian who does not have Spirit of God living in

them; we may not always realise the gift of the Spirit, but Spirit is in us and with us always because God keeps His promise.

"I will..." (v.16) 'Counsellor' is a difficult word: it carries with it a picture that's a bit touchy-feely now. We might think of someone who puts their arm round your shoulders to give you a word of advice, or someone who might give you some guidance for life. Actually the word is more a legal word than a touchy-feely word, more like an advocate, but the best of all a mix between two, what someone has called a 'legal friend' someone who will stand beside you all through life, support you, fight your corner. It might mean a whole lot of different things some of which we're now going to unpack.

"I will..." (v.18) The orphan in the Bible describes someone who is helpless. In the Old Testament, widows and orphans came in for special attention because there was no-one to look after them; there was no breadwinner to provide for them, so they were vulnerable to oppression and exploitation; there was no-one to fight their corner so they were given special provision in rules and regulations of Israelite society. The orphan, was by definition, helpless. So Jesus promises His friends that He will not leave them helpless. Mind, this is said on the night before He died; He had just told them that He was going to die and they were anxious, "what might happen next?"; but even then, even against the background of His death, Jesus says he will not leave them helpless. Turn that round: it becomes a promise of strength for living life; Jesus would give them the help and strength they needed for living life; He would come to them; Spirit continues the presence and work of Jesus. A prime example of that was Peter at Pentecost itself: here was a man who 50 days before had denied knowing Jesus under pressure from a maid servant, and now stands up in front of a huge crowd in the middle of the city and tells people all about Jesus; this is the strength and power of the Spirit. We are not left helpless, but Jesus is with us by the Spirit to help and strengthen us for the living of life.

Implied in that promise is a permanent presence. The Spirit with us is not a fly-by-night, switch on and switch off thing; the Spirit with us is the permanent, committed presence of Jesus with us, with His people. "I will not leave" suggests that the Spirit is with us always and everywhere. Where do we go to meet with God? We come to Church and in the peace and quiet of Church we encounter God by the Spirit; or we often picture God with us on the top of a mountain where it is quiet, or on the sea-shore; Iona was described by Geo Macleod as a thin place, a place where the line between the spiritual and material was thin and people who go there find it easy to understand why he said it. Actually, Pentecost is about encountering God in the middle of a busy city, in the throng of a noisy crowd, of the hustle and bustle of a city alive with visitors. God with us in the quiet of Church and worship; God with us in the hustle and bustle of work and family life; God with us when life is good and sweet; God with us when life is awful and hurts; God with us when we have things to celebrate, God with us when we mourn. The Spirit with us is a permanent presence to give us strength and help.

Can you teach me everything I need to know about God? No! But I know someone who can: *"But the..." (14:26a)* God has a big plan for teaching us; teaching us about Himself and about life is so important that He does it in several ways; there is not just one teaching method. He teaches us by the Bible and by reading the Bible we learn deep things about God, ourselves, life etc. But not just by the Bible because the Spirit's job is to teach us as well; He will teach us all things hand in hand with the Bible. The Spirit's job is to help us understand what the Bible says. I don't know if you ever read a book under the covers in bed at night by the light of the torch; you were supposed to be asleep and couldn't put the bedside light on, but you were reading

book under the bedcovers by the light of the torch; the torch enabled you to see the words. The Spirit is a bit like that torch, but this time to 'see' what the words mean, to 'see' what the bible is saying and to make that message come alive in our hearts and minds and how these old words touch my life in 2010. The Spirit is my teacher because working through the Bible, sermons, and other ways, I 'see' what life is all about and how to live it well, I 'see' what God is like.

I don't know about you, but every week make list of the tasks that I need to do, lest I forget! Sometimes they are on my notepad, sometimes on the computer, but almost every week there is a new list to remind me of what I need to do this week. The Spirit's task is to remind us of Jesus: "*He will...*" (14:26b) It is obvious from the gospels that Jesus' friends didn't always 'get it'; they didn't always understand what Jesus was getting at in His teaching; a great deal of it went straight over their heads. But later, not only did they still remember what Jesus said, but they came to understand it and they did 'get it'. That is the work of the Spirit. Perhaps there has been a time in life when you're facing an important or difficult moment and into your mind has come a piece of Bible to help you, strengthen you to cope, or to challenge you about way you're behaving, or help you deal with the problem, or to guide you – that is the Spirit at work, reminding us, teaching us, guiding us, leading us.

Look at the people in whom the Spirit is at work on Pentecost: they were full of energy and enthusiasm, telling the world what they believed, what God had done; they were strong enough to stand up in front of the crowd and tell people about Jesus; they were loving and caring, generous to share with others everything they had, they were people who prayed together, who listened to apostles' teaching, learners; they were people who would go on to serve Jesus faithfully all days of their life. These are the same qualities that the Spirit would instil in us today, that we are people who are inspired in worship to declare with all our hearts the glory of God, that we are people who are strong enough to live life by faith, who are not afraid to tell others what we believe when the opportunity arises, people who are generous to one another, caring and loving, sharing with people in need, people who are ready and willing to serve Jesus. Pray that God will fill us with His Spirit every day so that we are people with these qualities.

Can you help me be a good person and live life like Jesus wants me to? Can you teach me everything I need to know about God? Can you go with me wherever I go and help me deal with everything life throws at me? I can't do these things for you, but I know someone who can. This is the Spirit's job: to help us, make us strong, to teach and guide us, to remind us of Jesus' teaching, show us what Jesus is like, to go with us everywhere, God's presence with us everywhere we go; to help us deal with everything that life throws at us. The Spirit continues the work of Jesus, and the presence of Jesus in His Church; the Spirit is the link between us and Jesus Himself. The Spirit is in us; we should pray every day that God will fill us with His Spirit afresh; fill us now!