

Acts 1:1-9 & 2:1-4

Introduction

It was great to have James Clarke with us last week, preaching about the importance of the ascension, when the risen Jesus was taken up into heaven. Having completed the work his Father had given him to do through his death on a cross, Jesus is seated today in the place of highest honour in the universe, with all authority in heaven and on earth given to him. We read about it, last week, at the end of Luke's Gospel.

But we mustn't forget that Luke's Gospel is just volume one of his works. Luke wrote a second book called the book of Acts. And it begins with the event that we're celebrating today. Having ascended to heaven, the exalted Lord Jesus sent his Spirit upon his disciples from heaven to equip them to preach the gospel to the nations. In the power of the Spirit, they were to be his witnesses **in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.** (Acts 1:8) And so, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit comes with **a sound like the blowing of a violent wind** and with **what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.** (Acts 2:2-3). And they go out and start preaching the gospel in the languages of all nations. It's a day that's sometimes described as the Church's birthday. Yet, today, there's a lot of confusion, even ignorance, about the Holy Spirit. So, we're going to take the opportunity today to look at what the Bible teaches.

We're going to ask three questions. And we're going to begin with the Spirit's identity. That's our first question: *Who is the Holy Spirit?*

Then we're going to think about the Spirit's work. That's our second question: What work does the Holy Spirit do in the life of the believer?

And finally, we're going to ask the question that we *must* ask ourselves: Do I have the Holy Spirit?

So, firstly then, the Spirit's identity. *Who is the Holy Spirit?*

Who is the Holy Spirit?

The first thing we need to grasp about the Holy Spirit is that he's a person.

When we speak of God the Father and God the Son it's obvious that we're using personal language. Father and Son are personal terms. But when we speak of the Holy Spirit it's not quite so obvious. When we think of a spirit, we might think of something vague and mysterious. Not so long ago, people spoke of the Holy Ghost. It sounds as though we're talking about some kind of phantom presence that lurks in the shadows. People often speak

of the Holy Spirit as an *'it'* as though they're talking about an impersonal force like electricity. But when we read the Bible, we find that the language it uses to speak of the Spirit is just as personal as the language it uses to speak of the Father and the Son. The Bible couldn't be clearer that the Holy Spirit is a person. *Jesus* spoke of the Spirit not as *'it'* but as *'he'*. He says to his apostles, in John 16, verse 13, **'But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.'** Notice that Jesus not only refers to the Holy Spirit as *'he'*, and does so numerous times, he also talks of him in terms of personal qualities. The Holy Spirit guides and speaks. He hears and tells. Elsewhere, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit loves and grieves (Rom. 15:30; Eph. 4:30). He teaches and intercedes (John 14:26; Rom. 8:26). He searches and calls (1 Cor. 2:10; Acts 13:2). Those are all qualities that a person possesses. They are personal terms. The Holy Spirit is a person.

But secondly, the Bible also affirms that the Holy Spirit is fully divine.

Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus said to his disciples, **'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'** (Matthew 28:18-19) That only makes sense if the Holy Spirit is fully God, just as the Father and the Son are fully God. The Bible teaches that there is one God in three distinct persons. Not three gods but one God. A tri-unity or trinity: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So, in the Book of Acts, when Ananias and Sapphira sell some land and pretend to put all the proceeds at the apostles' feet, when in fact they've kept some for themselves, Peter says, **'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?... You have not lied just to human beings but to God.'** (Acts 5:3-4). To lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God.

The Holy Spirit is personal, and he is divine.

And he doesn't just appear for the first time in the *New Testament*. We read of the Spirit throughout the *Old Testament* too, where he is also described in divine terms. Psalm 139, verse 7 says, **'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?'** Where the Spirit is present, God is present. And he plays an active role *throughout* the Bible.

He has a prominent role in the work of creation.

The very first verses of the Bible say this: **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.** (Genesis 1:1-2) In the very beginning, the Spirit is hovering over this formless and empty earth. There's a sense of creativity, like an artist bending over a blank canvass, preparing to fill it with colour and beauty.

Psalm 104 says that it's the Spirit who creates life and continually renews creation (Ps. 104:30). Job's friend Elihu says, **'The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.'** (Job 33:4) The Holy Spirit has been at work from the beginning, giving life and sustaining life. Those are divine activities. And he isn't merely active in creation.

The Holy Spirit has an active role in the whole history of *salvation*.

He is a constant presence in the story of *Israel*. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God set his Holy Spirit among his people in the days of Moses at the time of the Exodus (Isa. 63:11). We're told in Exodus that it was the Spirit who gave artistic skills to Bezalel for the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exo. 31:3; 35:31). Likewise, we're told it was the Spirit who endowed Joshua with wisdom and leadership skills to take his people into the promised land (Num. 27:18; Deut. 34:9). The Spirit empowered judges like Gideon and Samson to deliver God's people from their enemies (Judg. 6:34; 14:6). The Spirit empowered David for kingship and Ezekiel to serve as God's prophet (1 Sam. 16:13; Ezek. 11:5). In other words, we can trace the active work of the Spirit all the way through the Old Testament. And Isaiah, spoke of a future day when God would send his *servant* upon whom his Spirit would rest (Isa. 11:2; 42:1). He was speaking of Jesus. And so, as we come to the New Testament, it's no surprise to find that the Spirit also has a prominent role *there*.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary's told by the angel Gabriel that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and that she would conceive a son, who she was to call Jesus (Luke 1:35). At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove (John 1:32). Jesus begins his ministry full of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for sin *through* the Spirit (Heb. 9:14). Peter tells us that Jesus was made alive *in* the Spirit (1 Pet. 3:18). Then, when Jesus has ascended to heaven, as we've already seen, it's the Holy Spirit who empowers the apostles to take the good news of Jesus to the nations (Acts 1:8). And as they preach in his name, it's the Holy Spirit who gives them the words to say (1 Cor. 2:13).

That's who we're speaking of when we talk about the Holy Spirit. He is God's personal presence, who, with the Father and the Son, *gives* life and *sustains* life and who, with the Father and the Son, has been working for our salvation from the very beginning.

So, what does this mean for you and me? Having thought about the Spirit's identity, next we need to think about his work in the believer. So we need to move on to our second question. What work does the Holy Spirit do in the life of the believer?

What work does the Holy Spirit do in the life of the believer?

This is where it all gets very personal.

We've seen already that we are dependent on the Spirit for life *physically*. Of course, we all know about the birds and the bees. We know how mummies and daddies make babies. But like Job's friend Elihu we can all say, **'The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.'** We are dependent on the Spirit for life *physically*. And we're no less dependent on the Spirit for life *spiritually*. Jesus said, **'Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'** (John 3:6-8)

Jesus is saying that to have spiritual life we need to have a spiritual birth. It's a second birth that's brought about by the Spirit. Without that second birth, we may be *physically* alive, but we are *spiritually* dead. The apostle Paul says to the Christians in Ephesus, **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...** (Eph. 2:1). By nature, although physically they were very much alive, spiritually, before they came to know Christ, they were dead. But then he goes on to say, **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...** (Eph. 2:4). By nature, we're all dead spiritually. And the dead cannot bring themselves to life. When you pass roadkill by the side of the road, you know that it's not going to get up again. It's dead. And it's going to stay dead. And that's our state spiritually. By nature, we're dead and we're going to stay dead... unless the Spirit gives us life by uniting us to the risen and ascended Christ, through faith.

Jesus said the Spirit is like the wind. We can't see the wind. All we can see is the effect it has on the branches of trees. And it's the same with the Spirit. He comes and goes as he pleases, bringing one person to life here, and another person to life there. It's not for us to understand why he chooses some and not others. His work is mysterious, in accordance with God's sovereign will. But when he comes, he takes up residence within us (1 Cor. 6:19). He convicts us of sin and produces faith in Jesus. Paul states that **no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord'**, that is, no one can express genuine, saving faith in Jesus, **except by the Holy Spirit** (1 Cor. 12:3). He pours God's love into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). He brings about our adoption to sonship and makes us heirs of heaven (Rom. 8:15). He gives us peace with God and the joy of salvation (Rom. 14:17). He leads us in the fight against sin (Rom. 8:13-14). It's a new fight, that we experience for the first time only as Christians. He gives us gifts to equip us for service in Christ's kingdom (1 Cor. 12:4). And he works in us to make us fit for heaven (Titus 3:4-7).

By nature, none of us are fit for heaven. By nature, our hearts are hard towards God. We love sin and despise holiness. Yet in heaven, there will be no sin, and God's people will live in his holy presence forever. Our natural hearts will find no enjoyment in heaven. If we're to enjoy the happiness of heaven, feel its comforts, delight in its blessings, and behold its

beauty, then we need a new heart. The love of sin must be taken away and the love of God must be implanted. And that's the work that the Spirit alone can do. He alone can make us love what God loves, hate what God hates, and delight in God's presence. There can be no entrance to heaven without the Spirit first entering our hearts, washing us clean of our sin, and renewing us from the inside out (Tit. 3:5).

And that means you and I *must* ask ourselves our final question. It's this. Do I *have* the Holy Spirit?

Do I have the Holy Spirit?

In 2 Corinthians 13, verse 5, Paul says: **Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.**

So then, here are five simple marks of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit by which we can do just that. They're all contained in the Bible. And they're all intended to give assurance of the Spirit's work.

The first evidence is genuine conviction of sin and the heartfelt repentance that goes with it (John 16:8). The Spirit opens the eyes of the believer to see their sin and to hate it. He fills the believer's heart with genuine sorrow for their sin and the desire to turn away from it.

Second, the Spirit leads the repentant heart to Jesus and the forgiveness he won at the cross. He makes the believer see the glory of the cross and the beauty of their Saviour. He moves believers to give up all thought of justifying themselves before God by their own good works or their religious observances and to put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation. (John 15:26; 1 Cor. 12:3)

Third, the Spirit places a new desire in the believer's heart to live a life that's pleasing to God and to grow in holiness (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Pet. 1:2). He causes the fruit of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control to grow and flourish (Gal. 5:22).

Fourth, the Spirit produces a habit of prayer in the believer's life. He produces a new longing to cry out to God as Abba, Father, and to speak to him about all that's on their heart (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). To those who have been born again by the Spirit, private prayer becomes as natural as breathing is to a newborn child.

And fifth, the Spirit produces a love for God's word, the Bible (Eph. 6:17). He places a hunger in the newborn believer for the spiritual milk of the word, just as a baby desires natural milk (1 Pet. 2:2). The believer has a new desire to read God's word, or to listen to it, and to meditate on it.

These, then, are five pieces of evidence which confirm that we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us: conviction of sin, faith in Jesus, a desire to grow in holiness, a habit of prayer, and a love for God's word. We may not have them all to the same degree. Our lives might display one more clearly than another. But nonetheless, where the Spirit is present, these marks, to one degree or another, will all be found. So then, ask yourself, 'Do I *have* the Holy Spirit?'

If you don't, then please pay attention to what Paul says in Romans 8, verse 9. He says **...if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ**. If you don't have the Spirit, you don't have Christ. And without Christ, there is no forgiveness of sins, no peace with God, no hope of salvation and no place in heaven. Paul wrote these things because of his concern for the souls of his hearers. As a minister of the gospel, that is my primary concern. And if you are concerned for your own soul, then please hear his warning. But please also know that God willingly gives his Spirit to all who ask him. If you don't have the Spirit, then cry out to God and ask him to pour his Spirit into your heart. It's what the Bible *encourages* you to do. Jesus said, **'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'** (Luke 11:13). Take God at his word and ask him to give you his Spirit and to unite you to his Son, through faith.

But if you *can* see the evidence of the Spirit's work in your life, then be assured that you are a child of God. You are loved by your heavenly Father. And you are an heir of heaven. Paul writes in Romans 8, verses 16 and 17: **The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...** And if that's the case, be thankful. It's all God's grace to you. You and I have done nothing to deserve the Spirit's indwelling. We've done nothing to earn it. It's God's undeserved kindness to us. It's all grace. So, praise him with a thankful heart.

And seek to be *filled* with the Spirit, as Paul urged the Christians in Ephesus (Eph. 5:18). Being filled with the Spirit isn't about you having more of the Spirit. It's about letting the Spirit have more of you. It's having him rule your life more and more with every passing day, letting him teach you and guide you, as you listen to what he says to you in God's word.

Conclusion

This is what we're celebrating this Pentecost Sunday; the coming of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who comes to us personally, takes up residence in our hearts, and unites us to the ascended Lord Jesus, through faith. And we praise God for him. Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for the gift of your Spirit, and for the new hearts and new life that he gives us. Thank you for his sanctifying work in us, making us fit for heaven. Please would he lead and direct our lives more and more each day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.