

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 10 JANUARY 2021

Note: In the congregation for which this material was prepared, a member of the congregation leads Prayers of the People, so there is no prayer of that genre in these resources on this occasion.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Lord our God,
the only true God, Father of our Lord and our Saviour, Jesus Christ,
we bring you our deepest homage, our praise and our adoration.
You are from the beginning; you are for ever;
you are outside time; indeed you created time itself.
Yet you saw fit to reveal yourself to your world
which is imprisoned by time,
to a world that is stained by its sinfulness,
to a world that had wandered far from you.
Revealed, not as a potentate – yet you are all-powerful;
not as an avenger – yet you have been mightily wronged;
not as a wrathful judge – yet you are righteous and your world is not;
but as a lover, a saviour, a friend, a protector, an advocate.
In Jesus Christ, you came as one of us,
but in him you showed your true face and your real character,
a God of love, who reaches out to your moaning creation
with pity and empathy and forgiveness.
Through Jesus Christ, you taught us to know you as Father;
through his dying and rising,
you invited us to become your very daughters and sons.
Through the gift of your Spirit, you transform us
to be your instruments in the world, to transform the world.
All this, when we deserved nothing.
Father, we can do none else but praise you and adore you.

Holy Father,
we confess that we have sinned against you, against your Son
and against your Holy Spirit.
We have not honoured your name;
we have failed to love you with our whole being;
and we have abused the great privilege you have bestowed upon us
of knowing you as Father.
Forgive us our wanton sinfulness, we pray.
We have not honoured our Lord, Jesus Christ;
we have become blasé about Jesus' great sacrifice for us,
and his mighty act of victory in rising from the grave;
indeed, we have sometimes even joined the doubters and the sceptics,
denying the very power that has saved us.
Forgive us our wanton sinfulness, we pray.
We have failed to open ourselves to the leading of your Holy Spirit,
failed to make the ground in our hearts fertile for your Spirit to take root,
failed to recognise the immensity of the gift
that is your granting of your Spirit to us.
Forgive us our wanton sinfulness, we pray.
Trinity of God, have mercy on us, for we are sinners.
We repent of our sins, and pray for your strength to do better in the days ahead.

For we ask this in the blessed name of Jesus.
Amen.

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

God did not send his Son to die for us because we merited such kindness.
God did not bestow his Spirit upon us because of anything we had done.
God acted in mercy and love,
reaching out with unwarranted compassion and generosity to his sinful creation.
God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world,
but to save the world.
And so we are assured that, in the risen Lord Jesus, our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

Genesis 1:1-5
Mark 1:4-11
Acts 19:1-7

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

We are people of the Spirit.
Go from this place, knowing that you are blessed with God's Spirit;
and make the Spirit welcome within you.
Nurture the Spirit with Word and sacrament,
prayer and worship,
and allow him to transform you,
that *you* might transform the world.
And the blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you and abide with you always.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

Just before Christmas, I paid tribute to one of the congregations Lauris and I go to regularly. It's a smallish congregation, but one that punches above its weight, and increasingly so. A number of new people have joined this year. That's remarkable enough these days, but if I told you that at least four of them were Catholic, you'd probably understand why I said to the congregation, "You can tell that the Holy Spirit is at work here."

We speak easily of the Holy Spirit. At the end of this service, our blessing will invoke our one God in three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we embrace and believe in the Trinity of God, mysterious, illogical and challenging as it is. In fact, when God *ceases* to be mysterious to us, then we should know that we've lost sight of the one true God, and substituted for him some inadequate, more convenient little creation of our own. God is and should be a mystery to us. We can only ever know about God what God has chosen to reveal of himself.

And there's no doubt about it that, of the three persons of the Trinity, it's the Holy Spirit who seems the hardest to comprehend. The Holy Spirit is elusive, enigmatic, and puzzling. The early Church acknowledged the reality of the Spirit, but it took a long time before the Church would commit to much more than that. The first version of the Nicene Creed, agreed in AD 325, merely acknowledged belief in the Spirit. It wasn't until the final version in AD 381 that the Church could agree the words we use now,

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son
is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.*

Even as we say those words, though, the Holy Spirit quite confounds us.

Today's three readings – from Genesis, Mark and Acts – all involve the Holy Spirit in one way or another. They are all very different, just as the manifestations of the Spirit are different and diverse. Together, the three passages provide a trilogy of insights into the person of the Trinity who so frustrates our feeble attempts to tie him down.

The first part of our trilogy is from the first creation hymn in Genesis. Ironically, when the great story of creation begins, the person of the Trinity who is *apparently* missing is not the Spirit, but the Son. God is first named as the creator. But in the very next verse, we hear that

the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.

So, at the very beginning of the scriptures, the Father and the Spirit are present. Of course the revelation of the New Testament – John's Prologue is just one example of a number – is that Jesus the Son was integrally involved in the act of creation, that in fact the creation came into existence through the Son. But that revelation came later. In this opening sentence of the creation hymn, the Spirit is present, hovering above the created world as it comes into being.

As the Old Testament develops, we see the hovering Spirit intervening in the human world from time to time. Those interventions are quite diverse. When Moses, leading the people of Israel through the wilderness, is overwhelmed by his duty to resolve all their arguments and judge all their disputes with each other, he appoints deputies to assist him. We are told that portion of the Spirit is withdrawn from Moses and comes to rest upon his assistants, establishing their authority. Later when the settled nation of Israel insisted that it must have a king, it was the Spirit who came

upon Saul, and it was the same Spirit who later withdrew from Saul and instead blessed David. It was the Spirit who empowered and inspired the prophets to speak in God's name. In Ezekiel's image, it was the Spirit who breathed his life back into the withered bones, symbolic of the defeated and captive nation of Judah, seemingly dead in Babylon. So in the Old Testament, the Spirit is the embodiment of God's creative force, the person through whom God is active in his world. In the Old Testament, the Spirit touches a small number of special individuals, empowering or authorising them to be God's agents.

Then when Mark sat down to write his gospel – from which the second piece of our trilogy comes – he was unequivocal about whom he was writing.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Just as Genesis immediately introduces the Father and the Spirit, Mark's gospel begins with the Father and the Son. What is not often acknowledged about Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is that it is a trinitarian passage.

In those days, Mark writes, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Son hears the voice of the Father as the Spirit descends upon him. It's almost like a "family celebration" at this pivotal moment when the Son has embraced his mission from the Father, empowered by the Spirit.

The point is, though, that the Spirit has come upon Jesus, the proclaimed Son of God. The Spirit who has been this mysterious presence throughout the Old Testament, has now descended upon the Son, marking him out with the Father's blessing and favour. We are witnessing a new way in which the Spirit will be present in the creation, because the Spirit is literally embodied in the Son. Unlike any of those marked out by the Spirit in the Old testament, Jesus is truly God at the same time as he is truly human. In Jesus, the Spirit has come to dwell in the human world in a completely new way.

So we come to the third part of our trilogy, a short passage from Acts which is very easy to overlook. Paul visits Ephesus, not a city where he'd been responsible for founding a church. In Ephesus he finds a group of about twelve people whom Luke calls "believers", so it seems that they regarded themselves, and were regarded as, Christians. But there must have been something obviously missing from their life together, which Paul recognises and seeks to suss out. Had they received the Holy Spirit? he asks them. They said that they'd never even heard of the Holy Spirit. Whose baptism had they received? The baptism of John – that is, John the Baptist. O, that explains it, says Paul.

"John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them

It's a remarkable story in lots of ways, but our interest today is in the Holy Spirit.

If we set aside what *we* know about Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon all the believers present, and just look at our three readings today, we've got three insights into the work of the Spirit, and there is a very clear progression. The three passages are, if you like, like the three panels of a triptych. In Panel A, we had the Spirit hovering aloof above the newly created world; in Panel B, we had the Spirit descending upon the Son as he commenced his ministry of salvation,

very deliberately entering into the human world; and in Panel C, from this story about the believers in Ephesus, we suddenly find that the Spirit is not a force that hovers above the world, not just a presence that is embodied in the person of the Son, but a gift that has become part of the inheritance of all who have come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That was, of course, the great gift of Pentecost, God pouring out his Spirit upon his people in a way that had never happened before. Those who have been adopted into the divine family as children of God, the sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, share in the indescribable privilege of being granted the Holy Spirit. That was what Paul realised was missing among the believers at Ephesus.

But let's notice something else about what happened in Ephesus. It's important, because, despite the teaching most of us have had since we were children, many of us can't let go of the idea that *we* have to be *good enough* to be saved. Yet we know our own sinfulness, and so we despair of ever being able to shake off the darker part of who we are. The great commandments, to love God with all our heart and soul, and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves, seem to set a standard that is so palpably unachievable that we fear in our innermost being that those words of Jesus are no more than the charge sheet that condemns us. We could never meet such a standard.

But what happens in Ephesus is a microcosm of the gospel. Let's hear the words again.

Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied

If we *are* beset by the belief that we have to measure up, that the only way to the salvation offered by God is to meet God's impossibly high standards, that the whole onus rests on our shoulders, then we, like the believers in Ephesus, have only experienced the baptism of John. John's call was to repentance. John pointed his accusing finger at the sinners who came to him and told them that they had to change. The only good news that John had to share was that he, John, wasn't the one who mattered. There was one far greater than he who was to come.

I have baptized you with water, he declared; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The repentance for which John called was important. We have to acknowledge our sinfulness and be honest about who we are. But the Spirit did not descend upon believers in Jesus Christ because they had managed to conquer their sinful selves. It was not about anything that they had done, or could ever have done. The Spirit descended on believers because of what Jesus had done for them. All that was asked of them was that they repent and believe in the Lord who had accomplished this for them.

God did not gift his Spirit to those who had earned it; and God has not gifted his Spirit to us because of any merit on our part. God poured out, and pours out, his Spirit on those who simply believe. The Spirit does his work among and through those who simply believe. No longer is the Holy Spirit a force that hovers silently above the creation; or a gift that is granted only to a handful of very special people. As Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism, so we receive the Spirit when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Among the brothers and sisters of Jesus, the Spirit will do mighty deeds.

Among that small but growing congregation of which I spoke earlier, the Spirit is moving and working, not because of who they are or what they have done, but because they believe.

And to each person who believes, a voice comes from heaven proclaiming,

You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.

Amen