

Pour out your Spirit on us today

The Prayer of Preparation for Morning Prayer during the last ten days – the period between Ascension and Pentecost has been this:

Blessed are you, creator God,
to you be praise and glory for ever.
As your Spirit moved over the face of the waters
bringing light and life to your creation,
pour out your Spirit on us today
that we may walk as children of light
and by your grace reveal your presence.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

About ten years ago, I preached on the Holy Spirit in a very small village church – a village just outside Stamford where Martyn and I own a house. It used to be our family home. I was preaching so that the vicar could write a report on me for the Bishop, to help him decide whether I should go forward for ordination or not. So no pressure! A friend of mine came along to the service to offer moral support. The sermon seemed to go well, but after the service, over coffee, my friend got into a conversation with a parishioner, who reflecting on my sermon, declared, *'But we don't do the Holy Spirit here. We don't want any of that funny stuff!'*

So I guess there's a danger in praying that prayer of preparation. Are we really asking God to pour out his Spirit on us today? And poured out so that each and every one of us might then walk as children of light, revealing God's presence? Or, if we're honest, are we just a tad worried about what God pouring out his Spirit might look like, if our prayer *is* answered? For, I can't imagine that the disciples had any idea, hiding away in that upper room in Jerusalem, what was about to happen as they followed Jesus' instruction to wait for *'the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.'* For, in speaking about it in our reading from John's Gospel, Jesus described the Spirit as a *'Counsellor'*, the *'Spirit of truth'*, as someone who will *'teach them all things'*, and will remind them of everything Jesus ever said to them. Doesn't sound too scary; sounds quite tame in fact.

However, in Luke's account, both at the end of his gospel and at the start of the book of Acts, Luke equates receiving the Holy Spirit as receiving *'power'*. In

Luke 24: 49, Jesus says: *'I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'* And then in Acts 1 – verse 8, the passage before our reading from Acts today: *'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'* It's clear from our reading from Acts that receiving the Holy Spirit in that upper room on the Day of Pentecost was indeed a powerful experience. Powerful in what they witnessed – a violent wind that filled the house, tongues of fire that rested on each of them and then being able to speak in tongues – different languages, so that all in Jerusalem that day, from *all* nations under heaven could hear the wonders of God in their own tongue.

But for me, it's what happens next as Peter stands with the eleven, and addresses the crowd, that demonstrates the true power of the Holy Spirit. Peter, a mere fisherman, not trained in public speaking, gets up and gives the speech of his life. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he's able to bring to mind passages from the Old Testament, words from the prophet Joel which speak of God's ancient promise to renew all creation – something every Jew would have known; and words from the promise given to David that God would one day place one of his descendants on his throne. He connects these ancient words and promise with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the coming thereafter of the Holy Spirit. A speech so passionate and so true that people were *'cut to the heart'* and pleaded with Peter and the other apostles, *'Brothers, what should we do?'* *'Repent and be baptised,'* Peter replies. *'And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'*

And we're told that, on that day, about three thousand did just that.

To become a Christian isn't to tick a box next to a set of beliefs, it's to enter into a relationship with the living God. And, it's as we do this, that the living God pours his Spirit into us. But, the question *'Do I have the Holy Spirit?'* is a question Christians frequently ask. Behind the question is a wondering, *'If I haven't had a dramatic encounter with the Spirit, if he hasn't met me in an interesting or obvious way, then have I really got the Holy Spirit?'* You may be aware of stories from church meetings where people have shaken, fallen down or prayed in tongues in the Spirit, but nothing like this has ever happened to you. So, you begin to wonder.

The answer to the question *'Do I have the Holy Spirit?'* is a clear *'Yes, you do.'* All Christians, whether they have had a dramatic encounter or not, have the Spirit living inside of them. This is what the Bible teaches. Jesus says in John 14:20: *'On that day, you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.'* Paul says in Romans 8:11: *'The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you.'* And in his first letter to the Corinthians: *'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?'*

I bought a great book a couple of years ago called *'Everyday Supernatural: Living a Spirit-led Life without being weird.'* It's by Mike Pilavachi and Andy Croft who head up the youth event Soul Survivor. In it, they say that if you're really wondering if you have the Holy Spirit, there are a couple of tests you can do. The first test concerns *'what you believe.'* Again, writing to the Corinthians, Paul says, that it's not possible to say *'Jesus is Lord'* except by the Holy Spirit. This is a simple but crucial proof of the Spirit's activity. So, if you acknowledge Jesus to be your Lord and Saviour, *wherever* you might be on the continuum of faith, your Christian journey, it is because the Spirit is at work in you. That doesn't mean that you have every question of faith sorted, but you *do* know, in your heart of hearts, that Jesus *is* who he says he is, and wants to be part of your life.

The second test is to do with *'what you desire'*. To the believers in Rome, Paul wrote, *'Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.'* So, a good sign of the Spirit at work in our lives is that we begin to desire what he desires. When you spend time with someone who cares about something – whether it's food, fashion or football – their passion can rub off on you. It's contagious. Equally, when we're full of the Holy Spirit, we begin to care about the things the Spirit cares about. Four things that the Spirit desires include his number one goal that Jesus is glorified. Jesus says in John 16:14: *'He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.'* Secondly, the Spirit desires that sin in our lives is dealt with. Again, John's gospel says it's the Spirit's job to convict us – to prod and poke us to realise when we're doing something we know is against God's desire for us. So if you've put something in the past that was not good for you, and are resolved never to go there again, then that's the work of the Spirit in you. Thirdly, the Spirit desires that people are loved and cared for. Paul sandwiches his two chapters on spiritual gifts around 1 Corinthians 13 –

the passage we read two weeks ago, which describes the importance of love. And fourthly, the Spirit desires that others come to know Jesus. The Spirit is sent to testify about Jesus and is given to empower us to witness, both in what we say and in what we do.

If you also have something of a desire for these things, and you've noticed that grow over time, then this is as a result of the Spirit's work in your life. It doesn't have to be loud or dramatic – it can be like a quiet whisper or a gentle nudge.

But there are times when we clearly don't *feel* that we have the Holy Spirit within us. Many of us still struggle with sin, feel distant from God, feel defeated in life, and lack courage to say anything to anyone about our faith. If we have the Spirit within us, shouldn't we *feel* different we might ask? Yes, but being filled with the Holy Spirit is never, I think, a 'once for all' lifetime experience. The Holy Spirit repeatedly filled the first disciples. They received the Spirit when Jesus breathed on them – on the evening of that first Easter Sunday when the disciples were together with the doors locked and Jesus just appears saying '*Peace be with you*'. Then on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out with incredible power, but even after this amazing experience the disciples continued to be filled with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 4 they gathered to pray and we read: '*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*'

Just as the disciples, our lives can be like broken flasks that 'leak'. No matter how powerful an encounter we may have with the Holy Spirit, we will always need to go on being filled. How do you receive more of the Holy Spirit? Simply by asking. In Luke 11: 9-13 Jesus teaches how we receive the Holy Spirit: '*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*' It's a gift freely given to us by God our Father and can be life transforming once we accept the gift for ourselves. And once unwrapped, it enables the Bible to come alive in a new way, for prayer to move from being a routine to a relationship, and for worship to become an exciting adventure.

But, above all, we seek God's presence, not an experience. The main things to remember are: if you believe Jesus to be Lord, then you have the Spirit living inside of you, and we can all have more of the Spirit. But don't worry about seeking a particular kind of experience – we will all have different encounters because we are all different people. But it's not something to be fearful about;

it's part of the normal Christian life. And we can all confidently and joyously expect more of God's Spirit in our lives. So let's not be afraid to pray that prayer of preparation.

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to you be praise and glory for ever.
As your Spirit moved over the face of the waters
bringing light and life to your creation,
pour out your Spirit on us today
that we may walk as children of light
and by your grace reveal your presence.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever. Amen.