

A Epiphany 05 6 February 2011
St Michael's Studio City
1 Corinthians 2.1-12 RCL

Of God's Spirit And The World

One of the glories of Christianity is our conception of Divine Trinity, that there is one God expressed in a community, a family. It is a theological idea that didn't come from theologians. Some people have the mistaken idea that a few ancient ivory-tower scholars and bishops sat down together and hashed out this strange and difficult concept to keep the average Christian baffled and compliant. You might put Don Brown of *The Davinci Code* infamy in this camp.

But the early church's original understanding of God came not from rational reflection but from everyday experience, an everyday experience that was then put into a coherent order by reflection. We could write piles of books on that experience and thought, but briefly it went something like this. The Church shared with our Jewish ancestors a conviction of a universal Creator God involved with His creation. The early Church experienced Jesus as human but also uniquely related to God in a way that they called divine; the language of the Gospels is witness to this conviction, the words used of Jesus are the words traditionally used of God as well as Jesus' own claims of special relationship to God. Then came the period after Jesus' resurrection, when the Church experienced the guiding hand of God in a particular and intimate way that was not Jesus but was *about* Jesus and His work. They remembered that Jesus had said He would send an Advocate, a Comforter, *to* His followers and *for* His followers, and this manifestation of God's power would continue Jesus' own work *with* them and *through* them. Jesus says in John's Gospel: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. (14.26; also 14.16, 15.26, 16.7)

Our creeds, the Nicene and the Apostles' and the Athanasian, are formulations of the thinking of those first centuries as limited human intelligence tried to rationalize the experience of divine activity. There was no doubt that there is but one God, and equally no doubt that there was within that unity distinction of activity that was yet completely in agreement with itself. And so we came to our familiar formulations: one God in three Persons, Unity and Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Creator Redeemer Sanctifier. The Father is not the Son nor the Spirit but is God; the Son is not the Father nor the Spirit but is God; the Spirit is not the Father nor the Son but is God.

I go into this little history of the development of the Christian idea and language of Divinity because during this season of Epiphany we have been and will be hearing about the working of God's Spirit among Her people from Saint Paul's first letter to the infant church in Corinth. It was a community of faith close to Paul's heart and yet filled with problems, with factions, with misunderstandings about the believer's spiritual life. Paul strove mightily to bring peace and

understanding to this fractious church and his letters to them are treasures of our New Testament.

If the incarnation of God into creation in Jesus Christ is one of the strengths of God's activity – it assures us of God's intimate closeness to us in all that human life brings – it also has its limitations. Jesus belongs to a certain time and a certain place in the history of the world. If His message and His activity is universal, how is it to get to everywhere else, to other times and other places? The answer is the Spirit of God, intimately in union with Jesus, yet freed from the limitations of time and space. God's Spirit is for everywhere and everywhen, and in the Spirit's work we will always see the lines and coloration of Jesus' life and teaching, just as Jesus's life and teaching is intimately bound to the Divine Father who sent Him.

The Church's understanding of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit to use the language we are so familiar with, is one of awe and mystery, and yet also of practicality in everyday life. At one end the Spirit is expressing that which cannot be expressed, the nature and will of the One who is completely other than our world, our universe, the creation – completely other. At the same time, the Spirit is inserted into our world, the living conscious loving intention of God to bring fulfillment to God's children, to God's world, to God's creation. So the working of God's Spirit is mysterious and awe-inspiring (what we may feel when we enter a magnificent and beautiful cathedral or forest and also mundane and observable (how should I behave toward that person who has so seriously wronged me?).

That is what we see and hear when we read Paul's letter to the Corinthian people. We see him acknowledging the complete otherness of God and at the same time the intimacy of a loving Father or Mother who would have the best for all children of creation.

Looking at today's reading, we see Paul linking his own message to the creative, contradictory experience of Jesus, a wisdom for living and understanding that seems like foolishness to those who do not see as God sees. We see crucifixion, not as defeat and death and indifference, but rather as victory and life and love. The world thinks that is foolish, says Paul, but we know otherwise. There is a wisdom that is deeper and fuller than the surface would indicate.

How are we to know that wisdom? Ah, here comes the power of God's Spirit. The Spirit takes what She is given – weakness, fear, trembling, implausibility, even unbelief – and makes of them a work of power, not of human power of persuasion but of divine power of good will (grace). Our response, then, rests not on anything human but on the immovable foundation of the divine. We have all experienced this when we have felt the glory of existence in the unexpected mystery of a baby, a sunset, a forgiveness, a commitment, a sacrifice, a new opportunity – the list of experiences is endless.

The Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit is one that leads us into the world, into engagement with all that is, with optimism for what can be, for God is with us in all that we do and say – and beyond. We are not alone in the mystery of the world, the universe, the multiverse. We have the good will and energy of One who is at the very heart of Divinity, who

chooses to make Divinity available to creation, to make God one with man, to suffuse the world with Presence that leads to the very heart of reality.

This is an experience and conception of who we are and what we are for that is beyond anything we could ever have thought for ourselves, the wisdom of the world. God's love, God's care, God's power, God's presence, God's wisdom, God's Spirit – this is what we clasp so tightly to ourselves and so freely give to a world that is incredulous, but oh so hopeful. Are we not a blessed people?