

Starters or Refreshments: Week 4

Spirit Filled

Aim this week: To look at the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of disciples

From Frightened Disciples to Enthusiastic Preachers

We finished last week's session with a empty tomb and confused, frightened disciples. Look at some of the early descriptions of disciples after the Resurrection.

"(The women fled) for terror and amazement had seized them...they were afraid" (*Mark 16 .8*)

"The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews" (*John 20 .19*)

"They stood still looking sad" (*Luke 24 .17*)

"Jesus met them and said, ...'Do not be afraid'" (*Matthew 28 .10*)

"When they saw Jesus they worshipped him; but some doubted" (*Matthew 28 .17*)

Hardly images of confidence! Yet within weeks the tide had turned...

"Those who welcomed (Peter's) message were baptised...about three thousand persons" (*Acts 2 .41*)

"(Peter and John were arrested) but many who heard the Word believed, about 5000 of them" (*Acts 4 .4*)

"When (the crowd) saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men they were amazed" (*Acts 4 .13*)

What had happened in between?

The Power of the Holy Spirit

In Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke who also wrote a Gospel, the following is described:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.' ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

The Intimacy of the Holy Spirit

In John's Gospel the writer records the Holy Spirit given in another way; intimate and gentle.

John 20 .19 -22 – The frightened disciples behind locked doors and then...

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

John's account echoes the story of Creation.

“The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2 .7)

In breathing on them Jesus gives his disciples his very life. They are a new creation. As St Paul said:

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5 .17)

Paul had more reason to know this than others did as we shall now see.

The Holy Spirit changes lives – as a man named Saul found out!

The Resurrection didn't bring an end to the conflict between God's will and that of sinful people. Those who preached about Jesus were often opposed and even killed. The first report in the New Testament of a disciple being killed because of his faith is about a man named Stephen. Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned to death. Those who threw the stones laid their coats at the feet of a man named Saul. In Acts we are told:

“Saul approved of their killing him. Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison” (Acts 8 .2, 3)

Saul, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ⁵He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ ⁷The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9 .1 – 9)

In Damascus lived a man called Ananias who had heard about Saul's frightening reputation. God told Ananias that Saul, an unlikely choice, would be God's messenger: We rejoin the account in Acts:

¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. (Acts 9 .17 – 19)

Saul's sight was obviously restored in more ways than one! From this point on he becomes as keen to spread the message about Jesus as he used to be to stop it being spread. Shortly afterwards Saul changes his name to Paul, no doubt as a sign of his new purpose in life (Acts 13 .9).

The followers of The Way (as the church was first called) spread their message rapidly. the followers of Jesus Christ were soon a distinct group attracting new believers from both Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) people. In the city of Antioch these believers in Jesus Christ were given a nickname – either by themselves or others – and were called “Christians”. Paul's ministry became one of travelling around the Mediterranean visiting the newly established churches as thousands of people came to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new life that they found in that faith. Paul also wrote a large number of letters to the new churches. Some of this correspondence survives and letters to churches in the cities of Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae form a large part of the New Testament.

Paul had his life changed and was strengthened for his task. What about us today?

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5 .22)

Where do we see the Holy Spirit at work today?

In the Church – serving others, worshipping, courage to speak out

In us as individuals – turning away from wrong, using our gifts for others, part of the Body of Christ.

To Conclude: Imaginative Prayer based on John, Chapter 20, verses 19 – 22

Notes for Imaginative Prayer:

Suggest that everyone in the group sits comfortably. They may want to close eyes or alternatively to focus on the candle in the centre.

Music may be played.

The passage is read:

It was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

Silence

(Read the following quietly pausing between each section)

Imagine....

Jesus has entered the room and is standing in front of you.

What is he wearing?

What does he look like?

Hear him say “Peace be with you”

Feel the warmth of the peace he offers.

Feel his acceptance of you

Feel his breath as he says “Receive the Holy Spirit”

Be aware of it as you breath.

Breath in the Holy Spirit as God’s new life.

Breath out what you want to leave behind or change.

Silence or Music

Soon we must end this prayer. But be aware that you can return at any time, for Jesus is there for us.

But for now focus on the candle

Become aware of your surroundings

Become aware of each other.