

We are on the journey from Easter to Pentecost. The Easter message is that life rather than death has the final word. Pentecost is the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming upon and filling the apostles and first disciples. From that day on the Holy Spirit is available to all believers and is the means by which we can grow in Easter life.

For 5 Sundays we are focusing on the Holy Spirit. Who is the Holy Spirit, what He does and His relevance to our lives.

This morning Who is the Holy Spirit? Notice the " Who " not what is ... The Holy Spirit is a person. We know God is 3 in 1. The Trinity made up of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who makes the presence of the living Jesus and His Father known. It is the spirit who seems to be the most mysterious.

I am applying for a course to start in September. I need to fill in an application form, get a reference from David, supply a photo. They want to get to know me. Who is Jane Ward-Hall? Not a perfect analogy but let's try to think about who is the Holy Spirit in the same way.

The Bible almost fulfills the same role as that of my application form. If we look carefully we will see the Bible gives us the full CV of the Holy Spirit. In finding out who the Holy Spirit is we will look at the difference between the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and the New Testament and how He is present today, without stealing the thunder of the talks to follow.

I used to think the Holy Spirit made His first appearance on the day of Pentecost, but how wrong can you be! As we heard in our first reading the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the first Chapter of the Bible. He has always been present.

We see in these first verses of the Bible that the 3 persons of God existed before the creation of the world began. The Creator, God the Father, " the spirit who hovers over the waters", v2 NIV and the son, Jesus, who we know is "the word made flesh" so whenever God speaks Jesus is present. The Holy Spirit, as a person of the trinity, lives in the constant flow of self giving Love. Love and goodness are the core of His personality.

There are various references to the Holy Spirit throughout the Old Testament, he is often referred to as "the Spirit of the Lord". I've picked out 3 examples.

Judges 14:6 the story of Samson reveals how the holy spirit empowered people "the spirit of the Lord rushed on him (ie Samson) and he tore a lion apart with his bare hands as one might tear apart a kid."

Or judges 6:34 " the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon and he sounded the trumpet" this is the story of God telling Gideon to reduce his army down to just 300 men and they conquered the entire Midianite army. The words "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit" says the Lord. Zechariah 4:6 come to mind.

In exodus 31:1-5 the Lord provides Moses with a craftsman of whom He says "I have filled him with divine spirit with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft".

We see a pattern emerging, in the old Testament the holy spirit was an external power who came upon certain people at certain times in order for them to achieve certain things for God.

With the coming of Jesus, particularly at Pentecost, we move away from the OT way of thinking, to The Holy Spirit being available to dwell permanently within Christian believers who welcome Him.

Our Gospel reading from John chapter 14 is part of a very famous section of the bible. It is John's recollection of all Jesus shared with his disciples during the Last Supper, the day before the crucifixion. Perhaps we can look at this reading as if it is Jesus reference letter to us concerning the Holy Spirit. Promising us that the Holy Spirit will come and what he will do.

Over the years I've thought a lot about this chapter, because for both of my parents funerals my sister and I chose verses from this chapter. They are comforting verses. Coping with bereavement was a time when I desperately needed my distress to be eased. In fact "the comforter" is one of the names given to the Holy Spirit.

What does Jesus reference letter for the Holy Spirit tell us?. In V16 the Holy Spirit is a gift from the Father, requested by the Son. He is referred to as "the advocate". Different names are given in different translations. This is because the Greek word used is "parakletos" which has a wider meaning than any of the individual English words. These include counsellor, friend, helper, comforter, supporter, encourager as well as advocate.

He will be with us forever.

Here The holy spirit is described as "the advocate to be with you for ever". An advocate tends to make us think of lawyers, and court rooms, but the holy spirit isn't someone who needs to plead our case before the father, because Jesus has already done everything that is necessary to make us right with God, that's what the resurrection proves. Advocate is more likely to mean helper, advisor, thus some translations use of the word counsellor.

V17 The holy spirit is the spirit of truth. Even though the world won't accept Him, he will live in believers and we will know Him.

V26 The Holy Spirit will teach us all things and reminds us of everything that Jesus has taught and said. Most importantly reminding us of God's love for us.

The Holy Spirit is our friend, he will never leave us, the world at large cannot recognise him, he lives with us and in us, he teaches us, he reminds us of Jesus's words, he reproves us of sin shows us God's righteousness, he announces God's judgement on evil, guides into truth and gives insight into future events, He glorifies Christ.

That's some reference letter and amazing promises for us to hang on to!

What does the Holy Spirit look like? I don't know. Stained glass windows depict Him as a Dove, shy and gentle, or as flames, cleansing, powerful, unpredictable. He is also described as the wind, or as breathe. If we invite him to live in us how can we recognise Him?

I had been a Christian many years before I really started to understand any of this. I was always puzzled what does it mean that the holy spirit lives in me. How could I know? I'm a scientist I need evidence?

My answer came one summer attending New Wine, the annual summer conference that many of us go to. Can I share my experience? About our 3rd year Roz and I decided we would apply for a place on team. Full of trepidation I put myself forward for the prayer ministry team. I felt very lacking in experience and full of fear, afraid that I would end up appearing a fraud.

On the first afternoon. Before you start praying for anybody the team gathers and is commissioned. That year Bishop David Pitches was praying for us. I knew that he was person of great experience who had started New Wine, in the 1980s. He prayed for some of us individually and said to me "Jane, the holy spirit is all over you". Wow! that was just what I needed. I wasn't hot or shaking, I was just filled with an amazing sense of peace and calm. From then on I could trust God, that the Holy Spirit was with me and that it would all be alright. And it was!

To summarise the holy spirit is a person, who is always good, always loving, always truthful, he will never leave us.
He is our friend, comforter, helper. He strengthens us , challenges us.

A closing thought. For years I thought that all Christianity is about is trying to be a good person so we can go to heaven when we die. But it is so much more. Jesus lived a human life, not to be a model for us to follow, but to live the perfect life in our place. He became what we are so we can become who He is. The way we do this is by surrendering to God and inviting the Holy Spirit to live in us. He transforms us, giving us more of the personality of Jesus. Making the church more truly the body of Christ. Everything the Holy Spirit is and does, in us, is to this end.

Easy to say, in a few words, but in reality, the adventure of a life time. One writer puts it -
"The Holy Spirit tirelessly works to bring some likeness to Jesus Christ out of us, just as a sculptor works to bring a glorious statue out of a rough block of stone."

We'll hear more about how over the next 4 weeks.