

Spiritual 2

1 Cor 2⁶⁻¹⁶ / John 14²³⁻³¹ /

What does it mean to be spiritual? Peter calls us to become a 'spiritual house.' But what does this mean for us? What is it to be spiritual? Here are some common definitions...

Visualisation/ clairvoyance/ telepathy and psychokinesis/ involvement in the occult and meditation/ belief in a deity/ self-denial.

It is important we think about this stuff because the world is, and we, because we deal in a spiritual tradition, should know what we mean by the word. We should know because it is now the 'in thing' to be a 'spiritual person.'

And we are called to be spiritual. God is Spirit and His worshippers worship in the Spirit. Last time I began with this idea – **to be spiritual means, in the first place, to come to Jesus, to follow Christ.** We come to Jesus because Jesus represents Truth and so we have a point of reference with Him that is far more reliable than our own spirits and because He represents power – not power that is destructive and evil but power above all other spiritual powers; power that redeems; power that seeks to restore and heal.

Today I want to go a step further by saying that the essence of Christian spirituality is worked in the cauldron of our **relationships**. To be spiritual is to find ourselves in true and whole relationships – **firstly with God and then, in the very same breath, with each other.** The two can really not be separated. As John says...

¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. (1 John 3)

Relationship is the key to Christian spirituality. It is in relationship and only through relationship that we may know God and know each other and, of course, know ourselves. Mother Teresa once gave this testimony which illustrates her deep understanding of this principle. She said,

"I once picked up a woman from a garbage dump and she was burning with fever; she was in her last days and her only lament was: 'My son did this to me.' I begged her: You must forgive your son. In a moment of madness, when he was not himself, he did a thing he regrets. Be a mother to him, forgive him. It took me a long time to make her say: 'I forgive my son.' Just before she died in my arms, she was able to say that with a real forgiveness. She was not concerned that she was dying. The breaking of the heart was that her son did not want her. This is something you and I can understand."

I wonder if your heart is breaking this morning. I wonder if there is something in your life which has so hurt you that can think of nothing else? I wonder also whether that thing is causing

enormous bitterness, a bitterness of the soul, a bitterness that is souring the rest of your life. God would say to you this morning – ‘Give it up child. Come back to me. Seek me for the strength you need to let this thing go and to forgive. I came that you might not only receive forgiveness but so that you might be able to offer forgiveness. [Let’s pray together...]

Forgiveness is important because so often the key to relationship lies with it. Jesus died that we might know the forgiveness of God and so that we might be able to forgive one another and so form whole and true relationships. And when we do this we enter in the realm of the spiritual – we become spiritual people. We have fellowship with God’s spirit and with one another. But this is so different from what our age generally conceives of as being spiritual. Instead the spiritual has been conceived of largely in terms of two other realms of the spirit.

The first concerns the fact that we have a spirit which the Bible also affirms and the second becomes overly concerned with the world of spirits and how one might influence this. Both tend to become very focused on how the spiritual can serve the individual and so both end up becoming rather self-serving approaches.

But the ‘spiritual’ in the NT is always concerned not so much with ourselves as individuals but with ourselves in relationship with others. Paul makes this clear in Corinthians when he complains about their disunity.

¹And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? (1 Cor 3)

What are spiritual people like? They are a people whose relationships are in good order; who are reconciled to one another and who can act, therefore, in unity. They are not bickering, even if there are differences amongst them. They are not divided even if they disagree. They are not angry with each other, even if they have been hurt. Their relationships, far from being the least important feature of their faith, have become the key indicator of their walk with Jesus. Indeed, they are spiritual not **in spite of** their relationships but **by virtue** of being in relationship, **through their relationships.**

Why is this the case? Why is it that relationship is so important in the NT? Let me give you two quick answers. The first concerns our make up, how we were made and, indeed, who we were made to be like! It is clear from the way God has revealed Himself in the Bible that God’s very being comes to us in the form of relationships. The Trinity is, in fact, first and foremost, a series of relationships. This is who God is. God is by virtue of the relationships within the Trinity. And since we were made in God’s image, we too are made for relationship. Despite the fact that we live also as individuals there is something about the nature of our existence that is simply incomplete without others. That is why perhaps the most dehumanising thing to happen to a

person is that they should become isolated, become friendless, become an outcast. And this is also why so often when we break a relationship for whatever reason, even when we feel entirely justified in doing so, we so often feel we've lost something.

A second reason why relationship is so central to our spirituality as Christians revolves around the nature of love. John makes it clear in his letters how important love is. Again, love is a primary form of God's self revelation. This is how God comes to us – as love. This is how God is in Himself – He is, as John says, love! But John prefaces this statement with something that is clearly, for him, of deep importance to the Church which is that the primary witness and way of being for the Church is that we 'love one another.' And how do we do that? Through our relationships. Relationship is the vector, the pathway, the bandwidth of love.

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4)

This, I believe, is why so many in the West are turning to the occult or to Eastern religion. The reason so many are happy to trust in these conceptions of the spiritual and not in the Gospel is because the Church has refused to admit that when its **relationships** both internally and externally are out of order then it has lost touch with the heart of its own spirituality. Jesus left us His Holy Spirit that we might become a spiritual people but the work of that Spirit, in large part, is to teach us to love; to relate as God relates and so where we allow our relationships to degrade, where we begin to take one another for granted, where we devalue one another, the Spirit cannot work.

Here at Leith we have unashamedly made growing a great community the central and highest goal in this church and, at first sight, this may seem to be a terribly **unspiritual goal!** Until you realise that apart from **the work of the Holy Spirit** we cannot make this happen. We might be able to make all sorts of other things happen in this church. We might be able to create a tremendous and professional sounding music team. Only the best could belong to it and only the best looking could sing in it of course. We might be able to have much better sermons in this church by firing the pastor and getting someone who can really preach up a storm – and of course that person would have to be much better looking too. We might even be able to become a wealthy church and build a cathedral to God's honour but one thing we could not do without the work of the Holy Spirit amongst us is to create **healed, restored** and **whole relationships**. Both true humanity and true community grows out of such relationships.

But there is a catch. If you want such relationships you must also have God's Spirit. The Church began not with an organisation, not with a committee, not even with a Moderator! The Church began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who was given that we might live together in restored relationships – with God – and with each other. And this group of people with healed relationships, with whole relationships, is then poured forth into the world to bring that same health and joy and light to the lost and the lonely and the outcast.

We can be a spiritual people when we are filled with God's Holy Spirit. Jesus tells His disciples after His resurrection to wait for the Spirit – to do nothing until the Spirit had come upon them...

⁴While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1)

And Paul urges his churches to 'be filled with the Spirit' and to go on being filled with the Spirit. So we find these two things become constant themes within the New Testament. The need to be filled with the Holy Spirit and the call to then form relationships of deep integrity and love

Next time I want to ask what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit but for now, let's remain focused on relationship. You know there are some relationships we cannot repair. Some people will not let us in. Some people will continue to reject us. Even Jesus knew what this was like. He was rejected even by His own disciples for a time. But for every person who rejects us there will be ten who are happy to be loved by us – if only we would consider them. What I find is that the more I take time to consider God, the more inclined I am to consider my neighbour, the more I am prepared to live in relationship as God would have me live.

Relationships are the litmus test of our spirituality. If we cannot sustain strong, constructive relationships then we have to work to do. If we cannot remain faithful in relationships then we have some work to do. If we cannot be ourselves in relationships then we have some work to do and if we cannot accept others as they are then we have some work to do.

If we want to be spiritual we must look to our relationships. This is the complete litmus test of all true spirituality. As Mother Teresa said...

"There is a terrible hunger for love. We all experience that in our lives - the pain, the loneliness. We must have the courage to recognize it. The poor you may have right in your own family. Find them. Love them."

Who are you reaching out to today!