

The Spirit at work...

Richard Dawson 26 May 2013

Acts 2⁴¹⁻⁴⁷ **Galatians 5¹³⁻²⁶**

When I was in my first year of ministry I helped to organize a parish picnic at a wonderful place called Lovell's Flat. There was an old school there – long since closed but still used by the locals because it had good classrooms and a wonderful outdoor pool which, in summer, was a marvelous community facility. So with its grounds and the pool the school made a great venue for the picnic. One warm February Saturday the church picnic was held and we managed to get a significant portion of the church there. It was a great day with the children having lots of fun and with families feeling very good about the whole event. But the signal event for me was the appearance of a farming couple who had in fact left the area some years ago having sold their farm and going on to enter into Christian service up north. They'd returned to see family and had heard the picnic was on so they came along. John, the husband, explained to me that he had been, as a farmer, about as far from God as a man could be until one day through a series of events he allowed the Holy Spirit to fill him. From that point on his life changed along with his priorities and his deepest desires and, after some time, God led them out of farming. Frankly I was impressed with the depth

of this guy's understanding and the deep peace he radiated so I asked him whether he missed farming. He answered quickly 'Not really – besides, he said, my dogs wouldn't do anything I said after I came to God so I really needed to start again and I knew that wasn't what God wanted. I said I didn't understand. Why wouldn't your dogs obey you? He replied, 'Because I never said anything to them without swearing beforehand and after I came to God all that disappeared and they just didn't understand instructions without swear words.'

Interestingly enough I asked a few people around the place about this man and they testified to exactly what he'd said. His farm required that cows be run down a public road and apparently he was known to curse and swear so loudly that the whole district knew when John was moving animals.

When the Spirit gets a hold of us things change within. We let go of old reactions. We know new peace. We let go of old fears. We know new hope. We let go of old ambitions. We embrace new callings. Everything changes and we know that something else is forming us from within. But how does this happen?

The truth is much of the how is a mystery and is hidden from us but we can describe in more general terms the dynamic of the Spirit within us and it boils down to these two things... the Spirit takes away some old and ugly things from within and the Spirit produces new things within. This is the best we can do to describe how the Spirit works within us.

Before I became a Christian I was a very unsympathetic person. I struggled to see things through the eyes of others or to be understanding of the struggles others were having. IN short I had a hard place in my heart towards others. Afterwards I found that had largely gone and, almost overnight, I was able to receive others without judging them. God had taken away something hard and ugly from my life.

We see this with the Apostle Paul quite dramatically. Before his encounter with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus, and his subsequent encounter with the Spirit through the laying on of hands by Ananias, Paul hated Christians. Afterwards he loved them. Something hard and hateful had been taken from him.

Each of us have work in this area to be done. Each of us will need to have things within our spirit exorcised – removed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes that work will be simple. At other times, especially if we've lived with this for some time and if it is a result of trauma or abuse we need help to really let it go. But the Spirit is in the business of cleaning us up. And it is something that is ongoing and needs to be ongoing in our lives.

One of the perennial problems for boats is what is called 'fouling.' Besides being unsightly, fouling growth can increase the roughness of the hull, decreasing the vessel's performance and maneuverability, increasing drag, reducing speed and increasing fuel consumption. If left unattended, fouling leads to

corrosion of the hull and to the vessel's deterioration. Fouling begins with the attachment of bacteria. It attaches to almost everything and when conditions are right proceeds to grow and multiply. It can appear as a slimy surface or can grow in a polymeric fashion to mimic hair or grass. It can be many different colors from blue green to brown or red. Once this slimy biofilm of bacteria attaches to the hull, more advanced life forms begin to attach, such as algae, protozoan, sea weeds, barnacles, mussels, sea squirts, tube worms and more. Each higher life form feeds on the more primitive and is attracted by the "Food" on the boat's bottom. In short this stuff has to be regularly cleaned off if the boat is to remain efficient and seaworthy.

We too, friends, face the same problem spiritually. We pick up 'life-forms' which look to feed off our spirits and to find a home there. It is the Spirit's work to clean this stuff up if we will allow it. We need to let the Spirit do this work by being open to the things in our life which are clearly out of order. Are we unable to handle conflict of any sort? Are we unable to say sorry? Are we never able to admit fault? Are we afraid of something in a manner which is over the top? Are we paralyzed by something or someone in our life? If the answer is yet then we're carrying a load of barnacles which need cleaning off.

The other major dynamic of the Spirit is that of gifting us good things – new things – things which allow us to operate in ways

we could never operate before. Sometimes these things are like tools which enable us to achieve things we could never have done before. Smith Wigglesworth the great healing evangelist of the 20th century could not preach to save his life. Whenever he tried the words just stuck in his mouth and the embarrassment paralyzed him and he would hand over, most often, to his wife who was an accomplished speaker. But one day after being filled with the Spirit he took the stage again and began to preach in a manner which from then on would have crowds hanging on his every word. So surprised was his wife that she exclaimed out loud that this couldn't be her husband because he could never speak like that!

But the more important gifts are not tools like this. Rather it is what the Spirit does to our spirit that is by far the most important change. If we analyse what you see happening in the first disciples here are some of the things the Spirit endows us with.

1. A lack of fear/ deep sense of peace and of God's hand upon them – enables them to reorder their priorities with God at the centre.
2. Deep sense of thankfulness which ushers forth in a new generosity.
3. A call to be in fellowship – to be committed to others both in communal gathering around the Lord's Supper and as individuals.

4. A Spirit of worship – a desire to worship God – to be in God’s Presence; to meet with God for ‘all our springs are in Him!’

It is this work which gives us the greatest clue as to whether we are, indeed, open to the Spirit’s work and it is this work which enables the church to live as it does in that time after Pentecost. This is why we cannot make our message into one of pulling our socks up. We cannot become God’s finger waggers for the fruit of the Spirit is the work not of the human spirit but of God’s Spirit within us. Paul says that...

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

(Gal 5)

But what enables this fruit to grow – to be formed within the people? Paul again is clear about this when he says earlier in the passage... ¹⁶**Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.** (Gal 5) What does ‘Live by’ mean? It means, quite simply, receive what the Spirit has to give – listen to the Spirit; seek the Spirit; be open to the Spirit and not simply to one’s desires. Desire is not in and of itself wrong but it’s a bit like hoping in a car and expecting the car to take you in the right direction. Desire is uninformed direction and we all know what happens when we give ourselves to that – crash!

But how do I know Richard? How do I know that it is the Spirit who is speaking and guiding me? How do I know what is right and wrong? Well you know because of what is formed within – these things will begin forming within you along with the fruit that Paul mentions. But there are a couple of other things which always attend the Spirit's work which we should look out for.

One is a deep and growing patience with others. The longer I remain in God the more I realize how patient God has been with me and therefore how much God longs to create in me the same godly patience. Patience with others comes across as love – as a willingness to walk at their pace and to understand their failings and confusion. Indeed, much of love is patience since we cannot love without being willing to walk with others. The other is a deep and unhurried peace. Whatever the Spirit does in us will produce the 'peace which passes understanding.' It is this peace which speaks so eloquently of God's presence in and through the Holy Spirit and so long as we remain in God's purposes we will know a growing peace. And it won't be a peace which is reliant on 'results.' Rather it will be a peace which is happy that we are in the right place with and for God.