

Acts 17.22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we too are his offspring.’

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Psalm 66

Come and see what God has done:

he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

He turned the sea into dry land;

they passed through the river on foot.

There we rejoiced in him,

who rules by his might forever,

whose eyes keep watch on the nations—

let the rebellious not exalt themselves

Bless our God, O peoples,

let the sound of his praise be heard,

who has kept us among the living,

and has not let our feet slip.

For you, O God, have tested us;

you have tried us as silver is tried.

You brought us into the net;

you laid burdens on our backs;

you let people ride over our heads;

we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

1 Peter 3.13-end

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

John 14.15-21

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

As Christians, we worship one God who reveals himself in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And, of all these three Persons, the Holy Spirit might be the hardest for us to get our heads around. We can have a picture in our head of God the Father, because we have earthly fathers as a sort of model of how a heavenly Father might be or might not be... We can have a picture in our head of God the Son, because Jesus was fully human, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have all the wonderful stories about Jesus that we know from the Gospels in the Bible. But God the Holy Spirit...we don't really have an image of this that we can draw on in our imaginations. God the Holy Spirit seems to be too abstract, too conceptual for us to imagine and if that is the case, how are we to interact with God as Holy Spirit?

But whilst that may be the case, Jesus did speak of the Holy Spirit in very concrete terms, actually, in terms of what the Holy Spirit will do in our lives. And the Bible writers as well do talk of the Holy Spirit in concrete terms.

So, who is the Holy Spirit – and why is he important to us? The reading we heard from John's Gospel comes from the Last Supper at which Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. He has been telling his disciples that the time has come for him to leave them but he is saying that they don't need to be despondent about that because God will still be with them – just in a different form: through the Holy Spirit.

But the absence of Jesus physically in our lives does not mean the absence of God in our lives because God is still with us, through his Holy Spirit. We proclaim that truth as we start our Communion Prayer: I say, "The Lord is here" and you reply, "His Spirit is with us".

As Jesus embodied God during his time on earth, bringing comfort and help and guidance and healing to the people he met, so God is embodied to us today through his Holy Spirit, bringing us comfort and help and guidance and healing. So we can be confident in God's presence with us, always...

And we do need to be absolutely sure that the Holy Spirit is 'God with us'. The Holy Spirit is not the spirit of life within each one of us. The Holy Spirit is not the human spirit striving to be the best it can be. The Holy Spirit is not the divine spark within us that empowers our soul. The Holy Spirit is the embodiment of God – dwelling within each one of us who have become united with Christ through our salvation.

The Holy Spirit, then, is not an 'It'. Traditionally, we use the word 'He' for the Holy Spirit - but 'She' would be equally OK because in the Greek, the word used is actually neuter, neither male nor female. So either He or She is equally right and equally wrong because the

Holy Spirit is the Person of God – not an It – but beyond gender.

And we need to think through the quite radical nature of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is not just 'with us' – he is 'in us': the Holy Spirit actually, physically dwells within us. As Jesus says here in verse 17: "You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." The Holy Spirit is God physically within us and if God dwells within us, then we will notice a change in our lives.

The first of these is that, as time goes by, we grow in the Fruit of the Spirit. You might remember these from Paul's letter to the Galatians, 5:22-23, where he says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control". These are the characteristics that the Holy Spirit places within us and increasingly should become the governing principles through which we live our lives the more we come to rely on the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The fruit of the Spirit grows within our lives and eventually blossoms within us. The second of these is that, as time goes by, we learn to exercise our Spiritual Gifts. These are gifts that the Holy Spirit gives us, which is different from our natural talents; gifts given to us to help us grow his church. In the Bible, there are 27 Gifts of the Spirit listed and all of us who are Christians have one or more of these gifts. And, as we discover what these Gifts are, so our ministry in the church strengthens and so the church grows.

So the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit are the two primary ways in which the Holy Spirit is at work within us to transform us into the people God has created us to be and to strengthen us for ministry in the church.

The Holy Spirit is God-present-with-us, in the here and now, transforming us and growing us so that we can be a blessing to others and to the world. Someone once described the Holy Spirit as 'the Present Tense of God': not the God of history, not the God of the future, but the God of the here and now, active in the world and active in our lives. The Holy Spirit is the one who helps us experience God on a day-to-day basis, the one who gives us faith, the one who sustains us, the one who keeps us in the presence of God every moment of every day.