

The Spirit Speaks

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The resurgence of various religions in our world in the last hundred years and the events of last year, not only in the United States of America but also in other parts of the world, compel Christians and people of other faiths to look again at the very foundations on which their beliefs are built. It is important to reflect again on Earth, Air (Wind), Fire and Water and their theological significance.

These four elements were identified many centuries ago in both the West and in the East as being constitutive of the world in which we live. In the Western world, especially in Greek thought, the four elements found a special place. Anaximenes (c.588-524 BC) identified Air as the one primary element out of which the whole world is made. Thales (b.624 BC) speculated that it is water that makes up the whole world. Gaia (Earth), the goddess Earth features prominently in Greek mythology and the same mythology also taught that Prometheus had robbed that wonderful thing called 'Fire' from the gods. Heracleitus (c.500 BC) taught that fire was at the very root of the whole world.

Empedocles (495-435 BC) resolved the apparent contradictions and put forward the idea that the four elements earth, air, fire and water are the roots of all matter in the universe. These elements cause the origination and decease of all things through forces of attraction and repulsion – love and hate.

Plato in his Timaeus seems to follow the ideas of Empedocles. In the East, especially in Indian thought, these four elements are recognized as constituting the whole world together with a fifth – Akasa – which is understood as space or ether.

In this Christian study of Air it is useful to probe the depths of some of our beliefs and consider what light other religions and systems of thought shed on our theology. In India and South Asia the Puranas (ancient Indian religious writings) considered Air/Wind/Breath a God and named that God 'Vayu'. Vayu pervades the whole world and symbolizes the presence of God everywhere – like Air.

In later Indian thought (the Vedantas) Vayu is not deified as such, but recognized as one of the five inter-connected elements that make up the world. When Vayu indwells a human person it becomes the life-giver – Prana (life itself). Prana is the essence of all the members of the body. When the self departs Prana follows. When Prana departs all the organs follow.

In the multi-religious world in which we all live today, it is against this background of the world's religions and philosophical thought that we must consider the symbolism of Wind (Air) in Christian thought. When Air is in motion (wind) it is capable of producing incalculable energy. So while Air symbolises the omnipresence of God, wind reminds us of God's limitless power.

Omnipotence and omnipresence are characteristics of God well symbolized in Air and Wind.

The Spirit speaks in the Bible

Genesis 1 teaches us that the world was a great void before creation – a formless Chaos (this is the Hebrew term) – and when a ‘wind from God’ (NRSV translation) or the ‘Spirit of God’ (RSV translation)[1] began to move upon the face of the waters, Chaos gave way to light, order, life, form and beauty. All this was – no, is – the activity of the Spirit of God. Genesis 1.1 correctly translated and understood would have us see creation as an on-going present activity. So do the Creeds in which we speak of the ‘Maker’ of Heaven and Earth. The activity of God’s Spirit is as timeless as the Wind and Air which symbolize it.

To speak of creation in the present tense makes this teaching more intelligible and apparent to all people. This is also the theological basis for our concern with the environment. So God’s Holy Spirit, while being a Person, is also divine energy in the world in a physical sense and in a visible way. The beauty and order and re-creation of the world that we see around us all the time witness to the activity of God’s Holy Spirit day by day and moment by moment.

This mysterious creative power of God, like God too, cannot be seen, but we do see its effect and impact upon the world and we feel its power. When this power of God is at work within the human person it gives life.

So Genesis 2.7 says that ‘God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being’. This event must be brought into the present. God breathes upon every living person and gives life to us all. God is the source of all life. God’s Holy Spirit does not merely enable people to live in a biological sense but to live a full human life. The Spirit of God indwells and inspires people and converts dry bones into living persons (Ezekiel 37).

Samson’s physical strength like our own is given to us by God. (Judges 13.25) But breath and physical strength will not together make up a human person. We receive understanding and insight from the Holy Spirit (Genesis 41.38). Our artistic and creative ability is a gift to us from God (Exodus 31.3).

This Holy Spirit plays a significant role throughout the pages of the Old Testament. It is God’s Holy Spirit that enabled Moses to be a ruler and law-giver (Numbers 11.23-25) and this is true of all those who fulfill these functions even today. Very importantly it is God’s Holy Spirit that enables people to prophesy (Hosea 9.7 and Micah 3.8), that is to discern God’s will and purpose for humankind and to declare them with courage and conviction. It is by God’s Holy Spirit that we participate as God’s agents in the historical and political process, and interpret the signs of the times. God gives us our longing for justice and Shalom (peace and prosperity for all).

There is yet another way in which the Holy Spirit gives us true and full humanity. It is God who gives us the will and the strength to suffer for the sake of justice and freedom,

like the suffering servant in Isaiah (Isaiah 42.1ff). We are enabled willingly and gladly to accept suffering and to take up our crosses daily in order to serve the high ideals to which God is calling us.

The Spirit speaks in the ministry of Jesus.

Christians will find themselves on familiar ground when we come to the New Testament. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is the source of joy, peace, fellowship and love. Jesus lives his whole life in close communion with the Holy Spirit, and it is in the power of the Spirit that he carries out his ministry. He was conceived by the creative (re-creative) power of God's Holy Spirit.

The activity of the Spirit was present in a special way in Jesus. The Spirit of God was present at his baptism (Mark 1.8,10,12) to affirm his identity and authority. It is the Spirit that led him into the wilderness (Matthew 4.1 and Luke 4.1) and enabled him to face up to the temptations and discover his true ministry. As a child he had grown in the Spirit (Luke 1.80).

Indeed the infancy narrative of Luke makes clear that now the messianic age has come not only Jesus but also the faithful will receive the gifts of the Spirit. The Spirit of God empowers Jesus right throughout his ministry, both to show signs and to preach the Kingdom of God with authority – and according to the great Lukan manifesto of his ministry spoken in the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus began his ministry by affirming that 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me'. (Luke 4.18). So he was constantly mindful of the Spirit of God leading him and helping him throughout his ministry.

St John's Gospel spells out the deep and mysterious relationship between Jesus and the Spirit of God. (John 1.33-34; 7.39)

St John also emphasises the importance of the part played in each one of us by our spirits – inner selves. We must worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4.23-24). Jesus also groaned in spirit (John 11.33) and was troubled in spirit (John 13.21). The implication here is that human beings have a spirit, inner self (also Mark 2.8; 8.12) that prompts us often to high endeavour. Sometimes the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Mark 14.38) This same spirit according to St Paul (2 Corinthians 7.1) is capable of being 'filthy'.

Yet it is because of the spirit in us that we are able to respond to the Holy Spirit of God. But St Paul makes a clear distinction between the spirit of humans and the Spirit of God. 'For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.' (1 Corinthians 2.11) St Paul also teaches us that the Spirit of God is present in all who affirm Jesus as Lord (1 Corinthians 12.3). None of us can make this affirmation but by the Holy Spirit.

So the Holy Spirit of God who has been active in our world from the beginning of time, giving life, light, beauty and order, was present in a very special way in the ministry of Jesus. This same Holy Spirit is in the life of every Christian, as St Paul teaches, enabling

us to affirm that Jesus is Lord. The same Spirit gives diverse gifts to people. (1Corinthians 12) But the best gifts of all are faith, hope and love – and the greatest of these is love. We do not often remember love is also a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 13) The exercise of these gifts becomes possible only because the Spirit of God pervades our own human spirits bringing out his own gifts in us.

The Spirit speaks to the Church.

Finally the Pentecost event marks the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first Christian community. Then as now we are a Spirit-filled community – a community of peace, love and fellowship (koinonia). We are empowered by a mighty wind, and inspired by a divine flame. We are not to be an exclusive community but to speak and be spoken to in strange tongues!

The Spirit of God is intended for and seeks all humanity. The moment we try to capture the Holy Spirit, domesticate him, and put him in boxes of our own making, we lose him. We must guard against being cold and calculating when we are acting in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit enables us to do more and better than we thought we could.

The Spirit enables us to conduct ourselves with new boldness, imagination and supra-rationally – as though we are intoxicated!! ‘These men are full of sweet new wine.’ (Acts 2.13 – my translation) This event not only marks the birth of the Church in history and its subsequent growth, it also shows us the ever-present marks of the Church.

We are to be that Spirit-filled community affirming life in all its fullness – a life of joy, unity, peace, love, light, order and beauty. Yet we must not try to keep the Spirit to ourselves, but affirm the importance and complementarity of all tongues, peoples and cultures. Though we shall learn much about worldly wisdom – administration, and management, and financial planning and such like – we shall act as people intoxicated with sweet new wine. We shall carry within ourselves the divine spark – the tongues of flame – that will always be our inspiration.

Above all we shall receive the gifts of the Spirit to equip us for the world in which we live. Such gifts are not merely offered to us as individuals – rather it is to enable us to become communities of God’s people in a special way – a model and the vanguard of the kingdom of God.

The Spirit speaks where it will.

However it is important to remember that the Spirit is symbolised by wind and breath. Such Spirit cannot be monopolised nor be the exclusive possession of anyone or any group of persons. No one has any right to claim exclusive access to the Spirit. Bearing this in mind it is important for those of us who are engaged in inter faith dialogue to affirm our belief in the Holy Spirit of God more prominently.

Our failure to do so has resulted in distortions of our understanding of the activity of the Holy Spirit, and these distortions can find expression in fundamentalist theology. The Holy Spirit has been active since the creation of the world and is the giver of life

and light and order. Wherever these are found in the world in which we live we witness the activity of the Holy Spirit both in a literal and metaphorical sense. Abundant living, true understanding, beauty and goodness are all gifts of the Holy Spirit. In inter faith dialogue we must point to these realities and affirm that all these witness to the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit of God.

Notes

[1.](#) The Hebrew word 'Ruah' can be translated as 'wind', 'spirit' or 'breath'. The use of this Hebrew word in the narrative of Genesis is a helpful reminder of the way in which natural phenomena and God's activity can inform and overlap with each other.