

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

(Joel 2.28-32 and 1 Corinthians 12.1-11)

Half a century ago whilst staying at York I was invited to attend the Sunday evening service at St. Cuthbert's Peaseholm Green.

Although arriving early there were no seats. I ended up perched on a window sill. The atmosphere in the church was electric. The vicar was David Watson - very correct, sounded posh, physically frail. He preached the gospel. There was prayer for the sick and people were apparently healed. A couple described their experience of God the previous week. Another person spoke in tongues and another interpreted her words. In one of the hymns some sang in tongues. This was all in the context of evensong. The Holy Spirit was powerfully present. The whole service was a response to his presence - to God's love for us. This was the beginning of a revival in York that lasted many years.

At that time most church services were very formal and lifeless and not many people went. This was in great contrast to the population as a whole. This was the days of drugs, sexual freedom, hippy lifestyles all disguising a great spiritual hunger.

It's much the same today. Church attendance is declining but outside the church there is a lot of talk about spirituality. People describe themselves as being spiritual rather than religious and spend time in meditation, practice mindfulness, yoga or reiki. These are mainly self-centred activities and not God-centred.

Today we are looking at those spiritual gifts that come to us as a direct result of an encounter with the Holy Spirit. In the creed we say 'We believe in the Holy Spirit the Lord the Giver of life. He has spoken through the prophets.' Do we understand what that means?

When the Resurrected Jesus breathed on the apostles and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit' did they understand?

The apostles knew their Scriptures - the Old Testament often by heart.

The Holy Spirit is there right at the start of Genesis the first book of the Scriptures.

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep and the spirit of God moved across the face of the waters.'

God's Spirit brought life when he breathed life into Adam and when Jesus breathed his Spirit into the apostles. The word Spirit means breath. Throughout the Bible we read how God sends his Spirit on men and women who act as his spokesmen.

Remember Ezekiel, transported by the Spirit to a valley full of bones and watched as the Holy Spirit breathed on them and they came alive. That's what the Holy Spirit does - gives life.

Some prophets like Joel spoke about the coming of the Messiah and the beginning of the last days. In our first reading we hear through Joel that in the last days God is to give his Spirit to everyone - young and old men and women.

And the sign of the Spirit's presence was to come in dreams, visions, prophecy. This was for all. Jesus is the Messiah the Saviour. We are living in the last times. This is for us.

What do we think of this all this dreams and ecstatic utterances? - Is it too emotional too un-British for us. We are very reserved as a church and possibly as individuals.

Throughout history enthusiasm in religion is looked on with some nervousness.

When John Wesley preached those who listened sometimes fell to the ground - and John Wesley was banned from the churches. The same reaction met the 'happy clappy' churches of the 1980's.

But people were often experiencing perhaps for the first time the love of God. To be aware that you are loved by anyone is an emotional experience be it your partner or your young child. Think how you feel if you see parents with

their very young baby or a couple exchanging their vows. People often cry. To experience God's love can be overwhelming. And to know that this Creator God Maker of all things wants to make his home in us is beyond words.

This prophecy of Joel clearly struck a chord with the apostles. After the Holy Spirit came on the disciples, Peter went out and spoke to the crowd and quoted these words in their entirety.

Paul in the second reading describes these spiritual signs of the Spirit in greater detail. Here he is speaking of how they are to be used within a church service.

This church in Corinth was very different to St. Mary's. It was very new, noisy over-enthusiastic and chaotic. The trouble was that their worship consisted of people shouting over each other with messages from God, speaking in tongues, going into trances and generally letting everything hang out. Paul says that in effect they should get some order in the service, take it in turn to speak and not speak in tongues unless the tongue is explained. It would be better if those who explain the word of God were listened to. He reinforces Joel's teaching that the signs of the spirit are to be shared by all and should be seen in every church.

And all these wonderful signs of the Spirit, prophecy, faith, miracles, healing, wisdom, discernment, tongues and interpretation of tongues, must be a reflection of God's love and are absolutely useless if they aren't prompted by love.

Paul assumes that all these manifestations of the Spirit should be found in the church and used in services as well as privately - are they? I don't think we know if we have some of these gifts.

Why aren't we more up front about these spiritual signs? There isn't any reason why we shouldn't practice or at least talk about such things in church

Jesus said that God's Spirit will live in us and lead us into all truth. That he will speak through us. The Holy Spirit was and is a gift to us that reinforces God's love for us. When we receive the incredible gift of God's Spirit then we will do miracles, forgive people. Have power from on high, know what to say when questioned. - Jesus said we would.

Do we believe this? After the Holy Spirit came the disciples did all of these things and more. The Acts of the Apostles is full of these activities of the Holy Spirit.

Peter went into a trance as he was praying and had a vision. John wrote the whole of the last book of the Bible as a response to a vision. The Spirit moved Philip and Paul from place to place. They performed miracles, prayed in the spirit, spoke in tongues.

It is very easy to quench the Spirit. When I came to a personal faith I spoke in tongues - didn't understand it. I was shy and there didn't seem anyone to ask. Occasionally over the next 50 years I found myself praying in tongues and by that time heard it on American churches on the TV and knew that wasn't for me. It wasn't until I came here 13 years that Norman and Julie Shave encouraged me to use the gift explaining that for me it was a language of love. At the same time I was unexpectedly completely overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit. Again I found it very difficult to speak of it. Why? Because no one ever spoke about such things.

Do we quench the Spirit - don't even allow for the possibility of such things happening. If the Spirit isn't working within us individually and as a church we die.

We do pray and speak about healing and have people talk about their faith. Let us resolve to be more open to the things of the Spirit and pray for the Spirit to come in power on each of us and on this church.