

# RECOGNISING THE SPIRIT'S PROMPTING

*(Acts 13.1-5 and John 14.15-21)*

It had rained constantly for a week; the river had burst its banks and raged through the village. Everyone tried to block their doors or clung onto lamp-posts or stood on something higher than the water. Sooner or later they were all rescued by boats or life rafts – all except one very pious Christian who refused to come out of his house. *'The Spirit of the Lord will protect m'e* he argued.

A man brought a dingy up to his front door where the water was now rushing into his house. *'No thank you'*, said the Christian, climbing upstairs, *'the Spirit of the Lord will protect me'*.

Hours later a lifeboat arrived as the river raged past the bedroom windows. *'No really'*, said the Christian, scrambling onto the roof, *'the Spirit of the Lord will protect me'*.

As the waters lapped round the chimney, a helicopter whirred onto sight and lowered ladder. *'But you don't realise'*, insisted the Christian, *'the Spirit of the Lord will protect me'*.

Finally, the flood engulfed the house and the man was drowned. He arrived in heaven in a state of shock. *'But Lord,'* he complained, *'why did your Holy Spirit not protect me?'* *'You were sent two boats and a helicopter,'* said the Lord wearily. *'What more did you want?'*

There we have a Christian man who failed three times to recognise the Spirit's prompting. How can we avoid that mistake?

Do you remember Max Bygraves? And his catch phrase *I'll tell you a story?* Well, I'm going to tell you a story – in fact, a few stories.

Edith was at the morning service, sitting for the first time next to a lady who turned out to be called Maureen. Maureen was no longer in the first flush of youth but by no means old. As the service progressed, Edith noticed what a lovely voice Maureen had and after the service she said to her; *'You have a*

*lovely voice, why don't you join the choir?' 'O, I couldn't. I haven't sung in a choir since I was at school'. But Edith persisted and Maureen did join the choir. It proved to be for her a very fulfilling experience both in terms of singing and in terms of her Christianity.*

James, a Christian, was 50 years old, a director of a successful company, in charge of its finances. His job was well paid and he enjoyed it very much but he began to feel that perhaps he was meant to be spending his time differently. This feeling grew and grew over a period of about four years until James became convinced that God had other things for him to do and he resigned. He was right. God led him into lots of other activities – some paid, albeit modestly, some unpaid – some in public service, some specifically Christian in nature. His decision was the best one he had ever made. His relationship with God became wider and deeper, more knowing and more loving.

Judith trained as a solicitor with a two-partner firm in Ripon. The elder of the two partners did court work, the younger, George, did conveyancing and non-court work. When Judith qualified she found a job in Sheffield doing all sorts of different legal work. To her astonishment after about a year she got a phone call from George, the junior of the two partners in the firm where she trained, offering her a job. The idea was that she would 'shadow' the man who did the court work, be made a partner and then take it over. She accepted the offer and moved back to Ripon. She had been there only three weeks when George had a heart attack and died and she had to take on his work. She was good at it – far better than she was, or ever would have been, at court work. She enjoyed it, did it well and eventually was acting for really big clients doing really big (and profitable) jobs. She was truly fulfilled.

Bill was vicar of a well-to-do parish in a large village just outside the town of Danton. He had been there a few years, was happy there and had seen the congregation grow. Now, Danton is one of those towns with a quite a lot of immigrants. It has a vibrant and often violent nightlife. It also has a large, virtually unused town-centre church which at that time was without a vicar. One day Bill was in the main street of Danton and suddenly he knew – he just knew – that this was where God wanted him to minister. He applied for the vacant vicar's post and got it. Under Bill's guidance, the big town centre church is now thriving and there is a wide ranging town centre ministry.

Those four stories are all true but I've changed the names and the places.

There is another story that I want you to know about. It is in the current In Touch and it's headed '*God's call takes Stuart and Nichola Main to Wearside to support an outreach project.*' If you have not read it, please do. A year ago they heard of the Eden Network. Eden targets deprived estates. To quote part of the article, *teams of Christians move in, become part of the community and get alongside the people, being salt and light and fleshing out the grace of God.* In that year it became clear to Stuart and Nicola that this was what God wanted them to be involved in. They put their house in Eaglescliffe up for sale: it was sold within 32 hours AND they found an empty property in a grim estate in Sunderland just opposite the church there.

Now let's have a look at what was happening in those stories. Did you pick up that they all show how God works through his Holy Spirit?

Remember Maureen, the lady with the lovely voice. That voice, that gift from God, was enlisted into God's service. Why? Because Edith recognised its potential and encouraged Maureen to offer it to God. The Holy Spirit spoke through Edith. Edith became his agent.

What about James? James who took four years of nagging by the Holy Spirit to accept that God wanted him to leave his comfortable, profitable, fulfilling job and do something different for him. No sudden flash of understanding; no Damascus road experience like St. Paul; just a steady drip, drip, drip - until James gave in.

Judith came back to Ripon to do court work, which she was not fitted for. Because of an event which caused anguish to George's family and many others, she came to do work for which she was always fitted and for which she was destined by God. His Spirit was at work through the death of someone greatly loved and respected.

Bill's experience was a sort of Damascus Road thing – a flash of realisation; *this is where God wants me to be and what he wants me to do!*

Stuart and Nicola came across a written article which triggered their decision to move up to that grim estate in Sunderland.

And what about our reading from Acts? There they are at worship – a group of Christian leaders in Antioch, when, out of the blue comes this conviction that Barnabas and Saul should go off on another mission. They had just come back from Jerusalem – and off they are sent to Cyprus!

Last week we had a day of prayer here in which many of you were involved – for some it was a new experience. An hour praying? An hour is a long time but it seemed like no time at all for many of us –perhaps all of us - who took part. And how did that day of prayer come about? On 20th July a rather reduced Worship Committee met and what happened was rather like what happened in that passage from Acts. It is true that we were not actually worshipping and we certainly weren't fasting but there was a clear conviction that many at St. Mary's were under pressure and that maybe there was a spiritual tussle going on - John Taylor mentioned spiritual warfare last week in his talk. Prayer was needed: lots of it and urgently. There was no time to consult and so it came about.

None of us can control the Holy Spirit. In John chapter 3, talking to Nicodemus, Jesus compares his Spirit to the wind blowing wherever it wants to. But, though we cannot and, I hope would not want to, control that Spirit, we need to recognise the Spirit's activity and be open to it. We have looked at some examples of how the Spirit works and prompts:

- ✓ Edith and Maureen – the Spirit acting and prompting directly through another person
- ✓ James – the Spirit working away quietly but persistently until he got his way
- ✓ Judith – where the Spirit closed one door but opened another, leading to a much more useful and dedicated life.
- ✓ Bill – a town centre and a sudden unmistakable conviction.
- ✓ Stuart and Nicola – inspired by something they read.
- ✓ Barnabas and the rest and the Worship Committee – a shared understanding that a particular thing was to be done.

*I will ask the father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever.* That's what Jesus said in our gospel reading, speaking about his Holy Spirit. What a promise! And it's a promise for every one of us to take up.

- It doesn't matter if we are 19 or 90.
- It doesn't matter if we are well off or just scraping along.
- It doesn't matter if we are not feeling so good or we are in the best of health
- It doesn't matter left school at 16 or we have been to university

What matters is to be ready for the prompting and action of Jesus' Spirit however that comes about – and we have seen some of the ways it might. If you feel that prompting, pray about it, talk to a Christian friend you know and trust so that you can be sure. Then respond and go for it.

Newcastle-born Mary Medd wrote a poem, picking up on Jesus' description of the Holy Spirit as a wind. She pictures the Spirit as sometimes a very powerful almost frightening gale and then as a tender, gentle breeze. The last verse goes like this:

*Penetrating breath of heaven blow me where you will,  
that, bending without breaking, I may go unresisting,  
on the road meant for me.*

So how about it?