

By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship

Let us join together in worship of our God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Creator, Saviour, Helper of us all.

Hymn 394

Chorus:

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,
gentle as is the dove;
teach us the truth and help us believe,
show us the Saviour's love!

1.

You spoke to us long, long ago,
gave us the written word;
we read it still, needing its truth
through it God's voice is heard.

Chorus:

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,
gentle as is the dove;

teach us the truth and help us believe,
show us the Saviour's love!

2.

Without your help we fail our Lord,
we cannot live His way;
we need Your power, we need Your strength,
following Christ each day.

Chorus:

Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,
gentle as is the dove;
teach us the truth and help us believe,
show us the Saviour's love!

Prayer of Approach

Open our eyes to perceive Your glory in all You have made,
Open our ears to listen to You,
Open our lips to praise You day and night.
And as we worship, pour out Your Holy Spirit,
Friend, comforter, advocate.

Prayer of Confession (*adapted from www.crosswalk.com*)

Lord, great and awesome God, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened carefully to Your Holy Word.

You said that if we confess our sins, You will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We come before you with humble hearts, asking for your forgiveness. We repent of our sins. Cleanse us Lord, and we will be clean. Restore to us the joy of our salvation and renew a right spirit in us. We need You, Jesus. And we love You. Thank You for loving us first.

Amen

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your Kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and for ever. Amen

Reading: Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. ⁴ And

God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Reading: Mark 1:4-11

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you

with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; ^[d] with you I am well pleased.’

Reading: Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ² He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ ³ Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ ⁴ Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— ⁷ altogether there were about twelve of them.

Reflection

Christmas is officially over. Yesterday, 6th January, was the twelfth and final day of Christmas. The tree and decorations are down, the last of the cake and mince pies have been eaten and we now must return to real, humdrum life. It can feel rather flat, boring and ordinary. Our topic today, however, is far from ordinary.

We have read three short passages of scripture with one important common factor, a mention of that mysterious being, the Holy Spirit.

The Book of Genesis tells the story of creation, the very beginning of everything. There are Christians who believe that this story is *literally* true, others who believe the scientific explanation of a “big bang” or some other process, but all Christians know that, ultimately, God is behind the creation and existence of all things, our entire universe. The story we read in Genesis 1: 1-5 expresses this essential truth.

Verse 2 tell us:

“the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

Let’s consider that phrase – “a wind from God” which is sweeping over an earth in which nothing else exists or happens. “Wind” is close to the meaning of the original Hebrew word *Ruach*, which has also been translated as breath or spirit in different Bible translations. The passage goes on to describe the appearance of light on the earth, the first day, associating this with the action of this wind or breath of God. This breath, directly from the Creator God is what we call the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit.

Let us pause to think about this. Even without looking at any other biblical references to the Spirit, just consider the immense power we are reading about here, for this well known passage continues, to describe, either literally or

metaphorically, the creation of every living thing on earth, all by the power of the Spirit, the breath, the mighty wind of God.

Moving on to Mark's Gospel, we read first that John the Baptizer was proclaiming and carrying out a "baptism of repentance" for all who came to him. And then a man named Jesus arrived, also wishing to be baptized. But of course Jesus was very different from all who had been baptized before – He had no need for confession or repentance so why did He choose to be baptized by John. The answer lies in what happened at His baptism:

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The heavens were "torn apart" – whatever this looked like to onlookers, it was clearly a dramatic sight. What image do these words bring to mind? We also see the Spirit "descending like a dove." The original Greek used here is for "spirit" is *pneuma*, which, like the Hebrew *ruach*, means wind, breath or spirit. So we are to understand that this same creative power from God came now to clearly display approval of this humble carpenter's son. This is the formal pronouncement that this man is indeed the Son of God.

Here is a moment where all three divine persons appear together – the Father speaking from Heaven, the Son submitting to His role and the Holy Spirit visibly conferring Jesus' status. This is one of the most significant moments in the Gospel.

This brings us to our passage from the Book of Acts. We are told that the Apostle Paul, on his missionary journeys, arrived in Ephesus, a large city located in what is now Turkey. The new Christian congregation there would be vulnerable to temptation of the pagan worship in this powerful and influential city, as well as frightened by persecution.

Reading through our Acts passage, we note that these new Christians, who had come to faith in Jesus through John the Baptist's ministry, had not even heard of the Holy Spirit, who, as we have seen, played such a key role in creation itself and in the commissioning of Jesus. Paul explained to them the difference between a baptism symbolizing repentance, which John offered, and baptism in the name of Jesus. This latter baptism is not a symbol, but a real, life changing experience. We are told in v6:

"When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied"

There are a number of references to Christians receiving the Holy Spirit, so many that we could fill many pages describing the effects and gifts bestowed on those early Christians. Some are said to have received the Spirit when they first professed their faith; others later, as an endorsement of their faith when their understanding was more complete. On many occasions, this event was accompanied by miraculous happenings, such as speaking in tongues, the gift of prophecy and of healing. 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 provides a list of examples.

It is important to note that these miraculous gifts were bestowed on the very earliest Christians. Do Christians today receive such gifts? Such manifestations of the Spirit are vanishingly rare today and one argument is that they were always meant to cease after the times of the Apostles – that is, the purpose of these gifts was to empower and build the early Church. The extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit were indeed chiefly exercised in public.

On the other hand, it would surely not be correct to say that "because the gifts ceased, they are not for today." Is it possible that the gifts are not in widespread operation today because modern Christians are unwilling to step out and look foolish (by claiming to have a message from God, for example).

This is written in Acts 2:38,39:

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.'"

We must acknowledge that in some churches, worshippers do experience what appear to be miraculous physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit, for example, in Pentecostal churches, and it would be foolish to dismiss this as misplaced enthusiasm. This said, the absence of such experiences in the life of a Christian does not indicate the absence of the Holy Spirit.

John 14:15-17 reports Jesus' promise:

¹⁵ *"If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."*

If you believe and you ask, you will have the Holy Spirit, that unimaginably powerful person of the Trinity, with you. Follow Jesus and receive.

Prayer of Intercession

Lord God, We pray today for our persecuted sisters and brothers across the world, surround them with Your love and protection; give them courage to stand for you. As we see their faithful example, help us to make the right choices for You and Your Kingdom.

We pray for the suffering and bereaved in all war torn countries. Please guide those in power to seek peaceful solutions to seemingly intractable problems. We simply ask for the killing to stop and for peace on Earth.

In our own country, our towns and villages, our churches, we ask You to comfort and sustain all who are suffering – the bereaved, the sick, the anxious, the depressed. We ask that You draw people to you, so that You may be praised always and everywhere.

May the Holy Spirit move across our sad world, bringing strength, comfort and hope to all. Manifest Your great power o Lord, we ask.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen

Hymn 395

Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on me,
Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me.
Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on me.

Blessing

As we continue our journey with Christ, let us travel hopefully and mindfully, led by the Spirit, towards the future God has prepared for us.

Amen