

Three realms of the Spirit

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

First Sunday after the Epiphany: the Baptism of Our Lord — 11 January 2015

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Have you ever read a novel or seen a film where first of all you think one of the characters or one of the objects is not important? Later on you realise that the whole plot hinges on that one insignificant thing. In the film *American Beauty* the most beautiful thing is a plastic bag. There is a scene when two young people are watching a film of a plastic bag blowing about in the wind. The wind gently and at times with greater force, moves the plastic bag back and forth across the scene.

There is a character in our readings today that is a hidden force. It is there in the story of creation, hovering over the waters. It is there in the encounter between Paul and the disciples in Ephesus. It is central to the story of Jesus' baptism and consequently our baptism. It is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is often overlooked as we read the bible. In contrast to God and Jesus, the Holy Spirit seems more hidden, more obscure. We tend not to notice it even when the passage is all about its actions and effects. Why is that I wonder?

Partly I think it is because we are a little afraid of the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps too it is how the Spirit operates in the world and because the very places where we find the Holy Spirit are hidden and obscure. It is not obvious where the Spirit is. Like the wind we feel its effects rather than see it. So what I would like to do is look at three places where we can more readily discern the Spirit, so we can see beyond the obvious, so we can be more open to its transformative power. The three places are heaven, the heart and the hands—three realms of the Spirit.

Heaven is the most obvious; God after all, or so we are told, dwells in heaven. Our language about heaven portrays it as a place up in the sky, out of reach, a place unlike this earthly, messy reality we call life. However, when the New Testament refers to heaven it is the same as the Kingdom—it is the place where God dwells. This place is not up there in the sky or on a cloud, although the language of 'up' and 'down' is used to describe the transition from one place to another. Heaven, the Kingdom, is, as Jesus said, close at hand, within us, nearby, it is a seed already growing, it is coming. There is a veil between heaven and us that will one day be gone and then we will see clearly.

When we hear in our Gospel reading that this veil is torn apart and the Spirit descends, it does not mean that Jesus saw a little door ajar miles up in the sky. It's more as though an invisible curtain, right in front of us, was suddenly pulled back. Instead of trees and flowers and buildings, or in Jesus' case the river and the crowds, we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether. The most transformative words we will ever hear: "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased".

If we want to be open to this power and presence we don't need a miracle, we need an act of the imagination. We need the ability to ponder anew what is hidden from our sight and our measuring instruments. Let me give you an example.

Not so long ago I came across a science report on Radio National and was intrigued to hear about a study into love. Apparently the experience of love can be explained by a chemical reaction in the brain caused by oxytocins. That love you feel for your children and your partner is simply oxytocin doing its thing. That love you have for God and your dear friends is just a chemical reaction. The researchers are even hoping to develop a two drugs: one that

will lessen the effects of oxytocin so that people can get over a broken heart quicker and a second that will heighten the effects that could be used in marital counselling: want to get back that lovin' feelin'? Take two pills twice a day. Of course all these findings are based on newts or prairie dogs or some other animal that mates for life. No human beings were harmed in any way in any experiment.

My point is that when we work from the premise that all there is before us is the material world—something you can touch, see and measure, something you can shake around in a test tube—then our understanding of the mystery and complexity of life suffers enormously. We miss the fact that it might be good to cry about love lost and loved ones gone. We miss the fact that it might be good to have to talk our way out of a relationship muddle rather than pop a pill. To be fully human we need to be able to imagine another possibility, another realm—a realm that calls to us beyond this material reality we see, touch and hear, to another vision where the peace and love of God reign.

So see if you can go through the day imagining heaven, the realm of the Spirit of peace and love, just there, right before your eyes. See if you can see beyond the obvious and hear the voice of God say, “You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The other place where Spirit dwells is in our hearts. The ‘heart’ in Hebrew and Greek is always more than the beating organ in our chests. There are 600 references to the heart in scripture and it occupies the most important place in the human system.

‘Heart’ in the Bible stands for one’s entire mental and moral activity. It is the very centre: the place of feeling, of will and of conscience. When you apply this understanding to Jesus’ teaching about the heart it all begins to make sense. Remember how he spoke about hearts of stone and hearts of flesh? He is echoing the prophet Ezekiel who wrote: “*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you.*”

And this is the interesting thing: that the Holy Spirit would be in heaven, that realm of God’s ever being just before us, seems obvious. But if we want the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, and continue to transform our lives, then we must lay down the ego, die to self, so that the Spirit of Christ can animate our new being. The Spirit dwelling at the centre of our being is a reality to which we must consent. God will not impose anything upon us. We must choose.

And this is the choice Jesus the man makes at the edge of the Jordan. We have a theology that tells us Jesus was perfect. If that is the case, why then did he need baptism? My stab at an answer is that this is the moment he committed his life to the path God chose for him. His baptism was the sign of that commitment. It is a sign of our commitment. When Jesus was baptized he modeled his future self-sacrifice, his dying and rising to new life. Baptism is not really a bath with cleansing water. It’s not a magic wash. It’s a funeral. It is a death and a new life, a new path. It is a once for all picture of the transformation that has taken place, and will continue to take place if we make the same commitment each and every day.

So heaven and heart—where do they lead us? They lead us to hands. For me, ‘hands’ is shorthand for our physical body and its actions. As disciples with the Spirit of Christ, we become the means by which God’s love is shown to the world. We say in this place, “we are the Body of Christ”, and it is the Holy Spirit that gives us the conviction and power to be just that.

There is saying that many of you would have heard. There are many adaptations of it but St Teresa of Avila originally wrote it. “*Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ’s compassion to the world; Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; yours are the hands*

with which he is to bless men now.” It is our hands, feet, ears and hearts that are moved by the Spirit. It is our bodies that manifest the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is unable to languish in heaven or be locked in our hearts. There is one other place to go—our deeds and our words.

However there is a risk. Through the Spirit’s prompting and guidance, God might ask us, just as he asked Jesus, to step out into some new form of ministry. And then what would we do? The Spirit is about creation, new life and new possibilities. Are we ready for that? Are we even listening? Are we ready to be driven into the wilderness where all seems lost? Are we prepared to be different, minister differently, to be open to death and resurrection? Are we prepared to invite the Spirit in, to go where we are lead, to make changes and create something new? Heaven, heart and hands—the realm of the Holy Spirit—these are the places where creation is born.

Let us then be open to the Spirit and today remember that God is leading us into paths of mercy, kindness, and love. We pray and hope that we will listen and have the courage and will to follow.