

Water and the Holy Spirit: three realms of the Spirit

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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The Baptism of Our Lord, Year B, 8 January 2012

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. In a way the plastic bag sums up the whole movie. The plastic bag might look very common, very insignificant but it has a hidden power and purpose.

There is a character in our readings today that has a hidden power and purpose. 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. Baptism is not just about water. It is always water and 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 and like the wind we feel its effects rather than see it. So what I would like to do is look at three places the Spirit lurks so we can see beyond the obvious. So we are reminded that it is there and has been with us since our baptism and we can call upon it's blessing. The three places are heaven, the heart and the hands—three realms of the Spirit.

Well 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 is 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, the sandy desert and the crowds, we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether. What meets us in that new reality is the Holy Spirit with the voice of God who says, "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. I was listening to the science report on Radio National last week 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 counseling — 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. We miss the fact that we may need to grieve with tears and rage for what is happening in the Holy Land. 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 the Spirit dwells is in our heart. The heart in Hebrew and Greek is always more than the beating organ in our chests. There are six hundred references to the heart in scripture and it occupies the most important place in the human system. Heart in the bible stands for someone'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”*.

Paul picked up the same theme when he wrote in Romans: *“hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who is given to us”*. And we receive the Spirit into our hearts at baptism, just as Jesus did.

And this is the interesting thing. The Holy Spirit obviously dwells in heaven, that realm just before us. 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 that we must consent to. 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 is a funeral bier. 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 short hand for our physical bodies and it's 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 is 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. The risk is that after accepting and acknowledging the Holy Spirit at the centre of our being, 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 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? We have been thinking of our future in this place. 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.

I'd like to leave you with some lines from American Beauty. These words are what the young man said to the young woman as they watched his film of the plastic bag being moved about by the wind and leaves.

Do you want to see the most beautiful thing I have ever filmed? It was one of those days, just minutes away from snowing, there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it right? And this bag was just dancing with me, like a little kid begging me to play with it. For 15 minutes. That's the day I realise there is this entire life behind things and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was absolutely no reason to be afraid — ever. The video is a poor excuse I know but it helps me remember. I need to remember.

Like the young man in the video we need to remember. We need to remember God's creative love, his gift of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In this place we try and get a glimpse of heaven where the triune God dwells. Sometimes our worship might feel like a poor excuse for the wonder and beauty of the Lord but as we share in the bread and the wine we remember ourselves as the Body of Christ. Today we remember we became part of that body at our baptism. We remember that his Spirit lives in our hearts and leads us to acts of mercy, kindness and love in the world. We pray and hope that we will have the courage and will to follow that lead. Let us pray ...