

## **GETTING TO KNOW THE SPIRIT**

Texts: Genesis 1:1,2; Psalm 104:24-40; John 16:5-16

By: Rev Dr Leo Douma

Date: April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016

I want to introduce you to someone. I'm not sure how well you know him. But he knows you very well, quite intimately actually. I wouldn't be surprised if you don't know him that well. He tends to be quiet, humble, never drawing attention to himself. He is gentle, very servant hearted, and incredibly gracious. And yet full of life, vibrant, artistic, a breath of fresh air actually. If you really recognise his presence it will deeply affect your life. It will put some real passion in your spirituality. Do you know who I am talking about? I am talking about the Holy Spirit. I want to spend time over the next month helping you to get to know him better. I want to do that to help us reflect on our 'passionate spirituality'. You might remember that this was our lowest factor in the Natural Church Development survey we did last year. I want to come back to that because too often we can live poor Christian lives because we just don't understand what God has given us through Jesus. Like the Holy Spirit who resides within us. A commentator wrote: 'The average church member's understanding of the Holy Spirit is so vague it is nearly non-existent.' Today I want to give thought to what the Bible teaches about who the Spirit is and his personality. The Spirit is God in us, the Almighty who resides in the heart of his people. If you have someone who knows you inside out, who knows the deepest recesses of your heart, who knows everything about you and still loves you, he would have to be your best friend, wouldn't you agree? The Spirit knows all about you. Let's get to know him better.

Now we have to say that it is not easy to work out what the Spirit is like because the Bible does not say as much about the Holy Spirit as it does about God the Father or Jesus, God's Son. Which is interesting because the Bible is inspired by the Spirit. It is all his work. But there already we get a clue about the character of the Spirit. It is not his nature to call attention to himself. He does his work quietly. He is all powerful, but not in the public eye. He works deep in our hearts. Any attention he generates is to Jesus,

not to himself. Hosea 14:5 speaks of the Spirit as 'dew', that comes by night. Rain you can hear and see falling. You can stand under it and get wet. It's obvious. But dew is the condensation that forms due to the change in temperature. It is unseen, unheard. Yet for desert country it is what brings moisture to the desert flowers and makes them bloom. Since God is Spirit, invisible, totally beyond our imagination we cannot really 'know' God in the usual sense of that word. But we can imagine what a 'father' is like, and so we have our images of God as a 'father'. We can conceive of Jesus as a person. He is fully human like us as well as God. We can picture him with his disciples, healing the sick and so on. But how do we visualize the Spirit?

Because of the difficulty wrong ideas have developed. For example there are those who see the Spirit as simply an expression of God himself. The Spirit is God's power. If you listen carefully you will notice times when you hear the Spirit referred to as 'it'. God the Father and Jesus are referred to as 'he'. But we can often slip up and say 'it' instead of 'he' when we speak of the Spirit. If you think of the Spirit as 'power' then you don't think of him as a person with his own character. You tend to think of an 'impersonal' force. But we can also tend to go in that direction because the Bible describes the Spirit, not only as the 'giver' of good things, but as 'the gift'. That's Peter's message in Acts 2:38 *"Repent and believe... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"*. The Holy Spirit is God's greatest gift to us. Also when we look at the gender of the word 'Spirit' in the New Testament Greek it is 'neuter' not 'masculine'. And in the Bible the word for 'spirit' is the same as 'breath' and 'wind'. We see that in Genesis 2 when God created Adam, he blew into the Adam's nostrils his 'spirit', his 'ruach', the 'breath of life'. Now in these things we should not see the Spirit just as a power of God, or a breath of God with no personality of his own. Rather it gives us a clue to his character.

We need to see first of all that the Spirit is one of the three persons of the Trinity. God is one God, in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just as the Father and Jesus are distinct persons, so is the Spirit. In the technical language of the Nicene Creed, as the Father 'eternally begets the son' so the Spirit eternally 'proceeds' from the Father and the Son. If we claim to know God then we must also know the Spirit. Knowing God is to know him as Father, 'God above us' and to know him as Jesus, 'God for us'. And it is also to know him as Spirit, 'God in us'. As one humorous commentator put it, 'Here the knowledge of God gets under your skin.' And this 'God in us' is a person with whom we can relate, with his own character. He is not just a power in us. He is a

person with thoughts, feelings and intentions. As a person he is someone we can bring great joy. And also someone we can deeply grieve by our sin. Yes, he takes it personally. We can know the Spirit is a person when we see how Jesus describes him to his disciples in John 14 as the 'counsellor', the paraclete, also translated as the 'encourager', or the 'comforter'. In John 16 Jesus says "*But when he, (notice how Jesus says 'he') the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.*"

Now taking what we said about the Spirit 'proceeding from the Father and the Son', and noting what Jesus says here about the Spirit, we get this general idea that the Spirit is the one who fulfils the work of the Father and the Son. We see that throughout the Bible. The Spirit is the one who completes the work of creation and also the work of salvation. He is the one who puts on the 'finishing touches'. The Spirit is the one who makes things beautiful. He makes things alive and refreshing. He makes things joyous and festive. The Spirit is the great artist in the family. He takes the work of the Father and the Son and completes them as beautiful masterpieces. In Psalm 104 the Psalmist praises God for his provisions for all his creatures. Everything is reliant on what God provides. Verse 29: "*When you hide your face they are terrified. When you take away their breath they die and return to the dust.*" But says verse 30 "*When you send your Spirit they are created and you renew the face of the earth.*" In Genesis 1:1 we see the Spirit "...*hovering over the formless earth*". And then through him came life and order, the 'finishing touches', so that God looked at all he had made and saw it was '*very good*'. We read in Exodus, while Israel was in the desert they were instructed to build the tabernacle. It was to be a place of beauty and splendour, a place for God to be worshipped. And we read that it was the Spirit who gave the abilities to the craftsmen to do the task. All the true beauty and wonder in creation is from the Spirit.

We see this even more so in the work of salvation. Here the Spirit does miraculous work. As with creation, so with redemption, the Spirit does not do his work alone. He fulfils the work of Jesus. He puts on the beautiful 'finishing touches'. It is the Spirit who fulfils the work of Jesus on the cross. He is the one who takes what Jesus achieved two

thousand years ago and applies it to us here and now. Without the Spirit, Jesus' death and resurrection would just be an historical event. But the Spirit makes Christ's work a reality in our lives. He is the one who renews a person. The Spirit gives new birth. He is the one who makes us able to believe, to repent of our sin, to trust Jesus. He unites us with Jesus himself. He gives the new life to a person so we can become more and more like Jesus. The Spirit is the one who takes away the guilt, the ugliness of sin, the pain of our failure. He brings forgiveness and new life, joy and hope and beauty into our lives. Speaking of beauty, the Spirit is the one who prepares the church so she is like a 'radiant bride' ready for Christ the groom. The Spirit in bringing the final finishing touches of salvation will restore the creation from its curse of sin. The Father 'rested on the seventh day' after the heavens and earth were completed in their vast array'. And Jesus finished his work of atonement on the cross when he cried 'It is finished'. But the Holy Spirit is not finished yet. He is restlessly continuing his work. But when Jesus returns, and when the new earth sparkles under a new heaven and sin is no more, then the Spirit will have finished his work. Then he will have laid the last 'finishing touch' on the work of the Father and the Son.

What we see of the Spirit is that he is the ultimate team player. He does not draw attention to himself. He works 'together with the Father and the Son' and glorifies them as he completes the master play. Note again what Jesus said of the Spirit "*He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.*" It's been said of Reformed church folk that we don't emphasize the Spirit enough. We put too much emphasis on Jesus and underrate the worship of the Spirit. But that's a distinction that doesn't need to be made. The Bible sees the Spirit and Jesus very closely identified. The Spirit is shown to be the life-power of Jesus as the God-man. In Isaiah (42:1) God says of his Servant, prophesying about Jesus: "*I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.*" And Jesus said (Luke 4:18) "*The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me because the Lord anointed me to preach good news to the poor*". It is the Spirit who empowers Jesus the man to accomplish his work as our mediator. And at Pentecost it is Jesus who gives the Spirit as a gift to the church. As Peter preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:33) "*Exalted to the right hand of God...Jesus...has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.*" The work of Jesus and the Spirit are totally tied together. Paul makes that clear when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:17 "*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where*

*the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom."* But you notice that in character with the Spirit, it is he who glorifies Jesus. As Jesus said (John 16) "*he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine.*" Here we see a key thing about the character of the Spirit: his servant heart. The Spirit is self effacing. He never puts the spotlight on himself. He puts all his focus on Jesus. One commentator has said that the Holy Spirit's distinct role is to fulfil what we might call a 'floodlight ministry' in relation to Jesus. In the city you will see beautiful buildings flood lit at night so you can admire the architectural details. Where the light comes from is obscured. You don't think to look for where the spotlights have been placed. It doesn't matter. Without the light the building is left in darkness. With the light it's architectural beauty is made very clear. That is the role of the Spirit. He as a humble servant fulfils the work of Jesus in us. He doesn't draw attention to himself. He is drawing our hearts and minds to the truth about Jesus.

What is he like and how does he work within us? Well, remember the '*Fruit of the Spirit*' as Paul mentions them in Galatians 5:22-23 "... *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control.*" We will start exploring these next in June. All these are the characteristics of the Spirit. This is how he acts in relation to us. He doesn't force his way with us. He gives us new life, brings 'peace' and 'joy' into our lives, and then 'gently', 'patiently' prompts us, stirs us, to read the Word of God and be obedient to Jesus. Because he is gentle and patient, rather than forceful and domineering, we can abuse him and go against his leading. And that can hurt him deeply. We can grieve him with our sinfulness. But the Spirit is ever 'faithful', ever gracious. He always stays with us and keeps prompting and stirring our hearts.

Now that you know a bit more about the Spirit, doesn't it stir your heart to acknowledge his existence in you and work together with him?! The Almighty, holy God resides in your sinful life because he wants to bring the 'finishing touches' to your life. As a humble servant, he resides in you for your sake and Jesus' glory. The Spirit wants to bring joy and beauty into your life. He wants to bring assurance and peace. So listen to him as he speaks to you in his Word, as he prompts you, as he stirs your heart. Don't hurt this humble servant with your deliberate sin. Respond to this your closest friend as he points you to Jesus and helps you to become like Jesus.

## Questions for reflection.

*These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.*

- Why is it we often seem to know so little about the Holy Spirit?
- Describe the character of the Holy Spirit as mentioned in the sermon: e.g. 'finishing touches'; 'ultimate team player', 'fruit of the Spirit'
- How does it impact on your relationship with the Spirit living in you if you see a bit more of what he is like? How might that change your attitude and actions? Why?