

Pentecost 2024

Galatians 5:15-25

“If we live in the Spirit, let us walk in the Spirit.”, Galatians 5:25

The verb “to walk” means more in the Bible than simply to wander about. When the book of Genesis tells us that Enoch walked with God, it is telling us something about his life, not his perambulations. The New Testament in particular is keen on this use of the word “walk” – peripatein, in Greek. Hand in hand with this usage goes the image of the Christian life as a “road” or a “way”, a word explicitly used by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles to describe the phenomenon we now call Christianity. Such an image develops the striking narratives we find in the synoptic gospels of disciples called instantly away from their lives and work to follow after Jesus as he walks from town to town on his way eventually to Jerusalem and to the cross.

The letter to the Galatians, from which we heard our second reading, is a polemic against the mistaken view that obedience to the ritual law should be required of Gentiles baptised into Jesus Christ. Paul writes in uncompromising and often angry tone to those whom he thinks have been bewitched into a misunderstanding of the gospel. The law has reached its completion in Jesus Christ and because of this the church

must display the characteristics of the end time – the coming to faith of all the nations, gathering metaphorically for worship on Mount Zion. In making this point, Paul frequently contrasts the terms flesh and spirit. The idea that physical actions can determine the acceptance of all people into Christ represents his dismissal of “the flesh”; instead, the Christian enjoys the life given by God, the life of the Spirit, which manifests itself in the fruits of love, joy, peace, gentleness and so on.

The famous phrase “if we live in the spirit let us walk in the spirit” is a beautiful summary of this central aspect of Christian doctrine. The Holy Spirit is often thought of as the poor relation of Christian teaching, but in many ways is actually not badly served so much by the church’s doctrine as by the human imagination. Our limited minds too easily take refuge in lazy anthropomorphism, so that the Spirit, not being described in terms of a male human being, is somehow harder to understand than Father and Son. We make this mistake if we separate, compartmentalize the Trinity and fail to recognise our dependence on the Spirit in all that we do.

If we live in the Spirit, let us walk in the spirit. The assumption, then, is that we do, as Christians, live in the Spirit. How is this possible? Because it is the Spirit that gives life. In other words, if we live, we live in the

Spirit. The Spirit is the source of true life, any true life entails the fact that it has been given by the Spirit. This first half of the statement makes clear the initiative of God, not human beings. God is the creator, God the Holy Spirit is the Lord the Giver of Life. Life itself is the sign of the spirit, and to fail to recognise the Spirit's presence is a bit like failing to recognise the fact that we need to breathe oxygen in order to live. We are not conscious of breathing, but if we are unable to breathe, we become conscious of that fact extremely quickly. The Holy Spirit is that which is taken for granted in the Christian life, for without it there would be no Christian life.

But the creative work of God is not about starting things off and then letting them go. In this sense, the doctrine of the Spirit and the doctrine of creation are one and the same. Creation is not a moment, not a point in time at which everything begins. Rather, creation is the word we use to express our dependence upon God. Everything which exists depends, for every moment of its existence, upon the creative love of God. In that sense, God is no less creating the world in this moment than he was at the moment we choose to call the Big Bang. Time was created with everything else, God is not subject to temporal restrictions.

So the creative power of the Spirit, which we might express simply as the love of God in action, is something which continues. As God has given us life, he invites us to live it. If we live in the Spirit – if God has given us life – let us walk in the Spirit – let us live a life in accordance with that gift. Paul is saying two different but inseparable things, and urging us to realise that the second is consequent upon the first. God has given us this gift, let us do something about it. But our doing something about it is not simply a response to God's gift, if by that we imply something that we do as opposed to something that God does. We are enabled to walk in the Spirit by the Spirit itself: it is God's continual process of bringing new things to birth in the life of the church and the life of every Christian which is the characteristic of the holy spirit lived and breathed out day by day, and – as with the Galatian church – the characteristic of the end time, God's pouring out his spirit upon all flesh – given to us in advance in the incarnation of Christ and the infusion of that spirit.

When people complain that the Holy Spirit features too thinly in Christian teaching they forget the words of Jesus to Nicodemus. The spirit – pneuma – is something which itself cannot be seen. Instead we see its signs. The story of the first Pentecost which we heard earlier, that extraordinary tale of fire and breath and language and life, is the New

Testament's attempt to represent the infinite power of the spirit in a single narrative. It cannot hope to do more than point, just as the Christmas stories do not explain the mystery of the incarnation, but communicate the paradox of Jesus' divine identity. The idea that the Spirit is only seen and known in actions like those of the first Pentecost is a bit like maintaining that the incarnation can only be taught from the narratives of Jesus' birth. The story of God, the story of the Spirit, is the history of redemption, the ongoing life of those reborn in baptism and nourished with the body and blood of Christ.

So the Holy Spirit, far from being absent from our life and our practice, infuses, inspires, gives life to everything that we do. The doctrine of the Spirit and the doctrine of the church can never be far apart, and the same is true of scripture, of sacraments and of the ways of Christian living. The fruits of the spirit which Paul describes - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – are the signs of the life of God lived in and through each one of us. To be open to the Spirit, to the creative love of God, is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. If we live in the Spirit let us walk in the Spirit.