

Sunday 2nd May, 5th Sunday of Easter – 1 John 3:24-4:6 'The Spirit of Love'

Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire....

This has been the prayer of the church through the centuries. The hymn from which it's taken, and which we've just heard, is over 1,000 years old. Welcoming the Spirit – inviting the Spirit to come – didn't start with the Pentecostal movement 100 years ago, it's been the heart cry of every generation of Christians.

St. John, of course, knew this better than most. He was one of Jesus' closest friends, he was breathed on by the risen Jesus on that first Easter Day, he was there at Pentecost and experienced the fire. And his gospel is studded with references to the indwelling and empowering work of the Holy Spirit – who baptises with fire in chapter 1, who gives us new birth in chapter 3, who enables us to worship God in chapter 4, who empowers God's word in chapter 6, who flows in us and through us like life-giving water in chapter 7, who dwells in us and encourages us in chapter 14, who makes Jesus real in the world in chapters 15 and 16.

And John summarises this life suffused with the presence of God's Spirit into this wonderful teaching in our passage for today, full of practical wisdom. Here we see 3 great gifts of God's Spirit to us, three reasons why we need the Spirit as a real presence in our lives:

The first is assurance: 'This is how we know that God lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us.' When we decide to follow Jesus we don't do it on our own. God doesn't just leave us to try as hard as we can and hope for the best. *God enters our lives directly* – indeed he comes to dwell in us. Following Jesus is not just believing a set of truths or doctrines, it is a journey of love, a lifelong relationship with our Lord.

As some of us gather in person to meet this Sunday, we can do so with great joy. Many of us love a particular building because it helps us to meet with God. And that is good and right: but may we never make the mistake of thinking that this is the only place we can meet with God. The awesome reality of our faith is that because Christ comes to dwell in us, we can meet with God every day in a different, permanent temple – the temple of our hearts. Jesus is here – with, indeed *in us*. As we saw in our Daily Inspirations this week, the glorious mystery which we now receive as followers of Jesus is simply this: '*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*'

May we never lose that sense of wonder that the Almighty Lord of all creation, perfect in power and love and purity, chooses to make his home in us.

That is the first and greatest gift of God's Spirit – to dwell intimately with us forever. God is not distant, he is near, so near that he dwells in us. But there are other gifts too, which flow from this central reality. **Secondly, we have discernment.**

We live today in what is often called a spiritual supermarket. Our interconnectedness has given us access to all kinds of beliefs and practices. And there is a general sense that all of it must have some sort of value because otherwise people wouldn't do it. So we pick and mix all kinds of practices which are labelled under the general term 'spirituality'.

But St John gives us some very wise advice. Not everything comes from God – just because it's labelled spiritual doesn't mean it's good for us, or comes from God. And here's the simple test in verse 3: 'every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.'

So there's our yardstick: if you want to know if something is spiritually helpful or spiritually harmful, here's the acid test – *does it point to Jesus?* If it does then it's from God; if it doesn't, then it isn't – so don't touch it. God is Christlike, and the Spirit's whole purpose is to glorify Jesus – so it follows that the only spiritual practices which are from God are those which point to Jesus.

We live in a spiritual world – but not every spiritual force is good. There are forces of evil as well as good. There are demonic powers as well as angelic ones. All those stories about Jesus driving out demons in the gospels are not just superstition, they are real. So John cautions us: be wise, 'test the spirits to see whether they are from God' (v1). Does it bring you closer to Jesus, or make him seem further away?

But discernment comes with **a third gift, which is really important to emphasise, and that is authority.** It's not easy to talk about evil forces and demonic oppression, but we don't have to fear it, because Jesus dwells in us. That's one reason it's so important to grasp this truth that God is with us. Jesus is more powerful than anything else in the universe: way more powerful than the devil, than all the forces of evil, than every human authority, more powerful even than death. Or as St John puts it in v4: 'The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.'

This one of my favourite verses in the bible, and it's one I come back to when I feel low, defeated. Yes, following Jesus is hard, this journey of ours has great challenges. But the One who is in us is greater than all of it. It's not a fair fight – Jesus wins, every time. The devil flees, sin is forgiven, hearts are made clean, our character grows. Jesus is greater.

So take that thought with you into your week. **Jesus dwells in you – and he is greater than everything else you face.** Come, Holy Spirit of Jesus, our souls inspire, and light our way with heavenly fire. Amen.