

“LIFE IN THE SPIRIT – 1”

Romans 12:1,2

Pentecost Sunday – the arrival of the Holy Spirit, rushing into the lives of Jesus’ followers and turning them upside down. The birthday of the Church as those frightened and beleaguered disciples, suddenly found themselves filled with new power, enabled with new giftings, energised with new enthusiasm and eagerness to communicate what they knew of Jesus and of God’s plan for salvation. Without that gift of the Holy Spirit to those first disciples we would not be here today. It’s right that we celebrate it.

Jesus had promised the gift of his Spirit to those who had spent time with him. He told them that they would receive this new power and that it would turn them into witnesses for him. Although he was returning to reign in heaven at his Father’s side, he was entrusting the continuing mission of the gospel to these people – and their spiritual descendants down through the ages – and they would need help. His Spirit would fill them, and continues to fill us today. Through the help of the Holy Spirit our mission and worship are transformed. Because of the Holy Spirit we can exercise our spiritual giftings and discover new dimensions to our Christian experience. With the Holy Spirit as part of our experience, we can know assurance in our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit helps us in our communication with God, enlivening our prayers and presenting them to God even we cannot find the words.

And there’s no doubt that the Holy Spirit is part of the experience of all Christians. Paul certainly emphasises the activity of the Holy Spirit in all his letters in some way or other. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, he devotes the first part of chapter 8 to expounding this theme. And in 8:9,15 he does make it clear that we are all recipients of this Spirit. As we’ve said before, the Holy Spirit is even at work in our lives before we become Christians – Jesus tells his disciples that in *John 16:8,9*. In some ways, we could look upon what Paul writes here as the theory of the Holy Spirit.

But, as always, Paul is also interested in the practice. We didn’t read from chapter 8 this morning, but from chapter 12, which seems not to mention the Holy Spirit at all, but it’s there behind every phrase, every thought. You see, chapter 12 marks the turning point in this letter. Up to this point there have been eleven chapters of teaching about the human condition, sin, judgement and punishment; about salvation and assurance, about the work of the Spirit, about God’s purposes for the lives of his people. And very interesting it is too. Without that exposition of the truth of the gospel we are really unable to make sense of all the rest of it.

But there are some Christians who behave as if that’s all there is. Christianity for them is simply an exposition of doctrine. The Bible is material for discussion groups and study and learned tomes. They love to talk about it, and to pore over the minutiae of it all. As we saw earlier in the year, they like to use it to define their own purist brand of Christianity in opposition to those who think otherwise. Others see it all as the way into an esoteric spirituality which involves all kinds of supernatural goings on and all manner of strange vocabulary, and enables them, again, to distinguish themselves from other (usually inferior) Christians who don’t do the things that they do in the comfortable confines of their prayer groups and worship times.

But Paul is not on for all that. He is desperately anxious that all he has taught about God and humans and sin and salvation should make a difference to people’s lives. Important as that doctrinal foundation is, it is no good unless it is lived out. And chapter 12 goes straight into that. This is all about living as Christians – and you can’t do that without the help of the Holy Spirit. So this chapter (and, indeed, the following chapters) is all about *Life in the Spirit*. If you claim to have the Holy Spirit, says Paul, then this is what your life should be like. There’s none of what R T Kendall calls “*wearing your spirituality on your sleeve*.” None of that endless talking and not doing. None of that looking down on other Christians because they don’t seem to have the more visible and spectacular gifts that you think you’ve got. Paul has dealt with the talking about it part. He has set out his doctrine. He has described the amazing riches

of God's grace in the face of humanity's woeful sinfulness. And now he says "*Therefore, in view of God's mercy, I urge you ...*" There, you've heard all about God's love for you: now get on and do something about it. **Live** as redeemed and Spirit-filled people.

You can know the Bible off by heart in the original languages, but if it doesn't affect your life it's a waste of time. You can have all the arguments about predestination and human responsibility buttoned up and watertight (and if you have, let me know, because there's quite a few people been asking me about it!), but if your life is sterile and joyless it is just chasing after wind. You can speak in tongues and predict the future, but no-one's really going to be impressed unless your whole life reflects the glory of God and when you do speak in English it is helpful and loving.

So here, in chapter 12, Paul starts to describe what a life lived in the Holy Spirit should be like. And over the next couple of weeks we'll see what he has to say as he considers using the gifts we have been given through the Holy Spirit, and as we live together in a community of those whose lives have been touched by the Holy Spirit. But Paul starts off by exhorting his readers to live lives that demonstrate that a transformation has taken place.

First of all he urges us to "*offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.*" There's enough in that one phrase to keep us going for the rest of our lives in trying to live out the implications of it. Paul has already touched on this theme in 6:13. And it's clear that he is actually talking about our physical bodies. We are to offer to God every part of our lives, including what we do with our bodies. It's all to be given over to him. Behind this lies a view held by some people in Paul's day that the body wasn't really important. Some people – and it wasn't only Christians – were so anxious to get really spiritual about things that they forgot or took the decision to ignore their bodies. And that led to two equally wrong extremes of thought. Either they became really ascetic, so that their body was subdued and not really taken care of. Or they became really hedonistic, thinking that, if the body doesn't matter, they could do what they liked with it.

And there are still some people like that around today. Some neglect their physical well-being as a way of showing off their spirituality. And some teach such things as "sinning in the flesh isn't wrong; it's sinning in the spirit that's wrong" – an argument I have never fully understood. We must be very wary indeed of separating off bits of our lives and considering them to be outside the orbit of God's influence. Very often, when we do that, it's the physical bits that get pushed aside – we think that God isn't interested in what we eat, in our sports, in our sexuality and so on. But he is. He has created us as physical beings and it's in our physical lives that we show most clearly to those around us that Jesus does make a difference.

When we commit ourselves to Christ and his ways, when we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our lives with his power, then we are to give over *every* part of ourselves. If we are living in the Spirit our whole being becomes a "*living sacrifice*" and the completeness of that sacrifice is to embrace our whole being. This is not an offering of part of ourselves, it's a real sacrifice that takes all we have to give. I'll remind you of the story of the pig and the chicken once again. As the farmer strode across the farmyard to get himself some breakfast, the chicken was bragging to the pig about what a contribution she made to the farmer's fried breakfast. The pig grunted and said, "It's alright for you: you just have to make an offering when you give him an egg. When he wants bacon as well, it means total sacrifice for me."

The completeness of it is emphasised in the second part of this verse – "*this is your spiritual act of worship.*" The word Paul uses here that is translated "*spiritual*" isn't the usual word for spiritual. It only occurs in one other place in the New Testament – *1 Peter 2:2* – and it is better translated (as the NIV text note says) as "*reasonable*". This sacrifice is something that must involve our mind, our intellect. It is rational, in contrast to those mechanical, instinctive or impulsive functions that can so often characterise our bodily behaviour. We need to think it out and choose to give our whole selves to God.

You see, the goat or bullock that was sacrificed by the conscientious Jew was **his** sacrifice. The animal didn't have a lot of choice in the matter: it couldn't claim to be making a sacrifice. It was the worshipper who made the sacrifice, choosing to give up something of his own. We are both the offerer and the offered as we choose to lay our lives on the altar of obedience to Christ.

But Paul is also aware that our outward, bodily behaviour is governed by our attitudes, so he also says ***“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”*** If you really are one of God's people' with the Holy Spirit at work in your life, then your attitudes need to be sorted out as well. It's so easy to get sucked in to thinking as the world does, to going with the flow to the extent that there is nothing to distinguish you and your apparent beliefs from the rest of society. Something radical needs to happen. You need a new outlook on life, a new approach to other people, a new desire to follow God and his ways. What so often happens in our Christian lives is that we try to modify our behaviour without renewing our attitudes – and then we have to stick some kind of spiritual veneer over the top to help us fool other people into thinking that we are as godly as we'd like them to believe. The trouble is that under stress the attitudes start to show through, the veneer rubs off and we are exposed for the shallow people that we are.

We've talked at length about attitudes and mind-set already this year. So I don't want to labour this point again. Basically the challenge is there to allow God to transform your life – every part of it, from the physical to the spiritual, by way of attitudes and intellect. We'll look at some of the implications of it in the next couple of weeks, but this is all about life in the Spirit, living as people who are truly aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. Just get on and do it, says Paul, and then you'll begin to see what God's will is for you in your life. He will lead you forward as you set out with him.