

“HOPE, HOLINESS, POWER & LOVE”

Romans 15:13-33

It's interesting listening to what people say, or reading what they write, and trying to work out exactly what they believe on various issues. What they really believe becomes obvious from what they say. I don't mean from their big statements, their speeches, sermons or whatever – the things they say when they want other people to think they believe certain things. And I don't really mean reading between the lines either. What you really believe is obvious from the little things: odd verbal clues – phrases, particular uses of vocabulary, certain words that crop up more often than others. It gives a much better insight into your ideas than the things you say when you are wanting to create an impression.

What we've just read is an illustration of that. In this fifteenth chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul is dealing with a variety of issues. He talks about his own ministry, his travel plans, Christian relationships. As with so many of his letters, the last couple of chapters are full of all sorts of bits and pieces which are concerned with personal practicalities rather than great theological arguments and creedal statements. But in amongst the stuff about why he is a “*minister to the Gentiles*” (v16) and his plans to visit Spain (v24), there are some strong clues as to what he thinks about the Holy Spirit. He's not writing about the Spirit, but the way he uses certain phrases tells us something about what he actually believes the Holy Spirit to be involved in.

So this morning, on Pentecost Sunday, when we particularly recall the gift of the Holy Spirit to the followers of Jesus, the turning point in the early experience of the Church, let's reflect for a few minutes on what this Holy Spirit is all about. Paul uses four phrases in this passage which tell us about the Spirit's work in our lives, four aspects of the Spirit, which often seem to be in short supply or rather neglected by the contemporary church. I believe that at this time and in this place we need to think very carefully about these four things if we are to have any impact on our community, if we are to remain distinctively Christian.

1. HOPE (v13)

In his short benediction in v13, Paul prays that the Roman Christians will “*overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*” That is needed perhaps more than ever in our culture. It often seems that hope is drained out of us by the hopelessness of our culture today. In an age when the aspirations and ambitions of many are summed up in a snarled “Whatever!”, we see people who have no idea at all of what is to come, or what they want to come. It is a culture characterised by a nihilistic worldview, a belief that nothing will come of anything: it's all a waste of time. Any meaning that we give to life is a product of our own effort, an attempt to forge our own destiny – existentialism – and most people, it seems, cannot be bothered. When children are encouraged to believe that the only point to life is what they give it, and their experiences are all to do with attaining targets and reaching goals, then life is drained of its optimism and its hope. We end up with a generation obsessed with their rights here and now and with the transitory appeal of so-called celebrity. Beyond that, there is nothing.

I had the unfortunate experience of turning on the television to watch the news a couple of weeks ago and discovering that I was watching the last few housemates arriving in the *Big Brother* house. I don't think I have ever seen such empty, vacuous, hopeless lives. Their aspirations involved such noble aims as “marrying a premiership footballer” and “getting laid as often as possible”. What was even more depressing was that a large crowd (who must have been on drugs or being handsomely paid to perform) cheered them to the echo. Is this what our culture has sunk to?

And those of an older generation have little cause for self-congratulation. Read the letters page of any of the local newspapers, eavesdrop on the conversations in the supermarket queue or in the pub or at the bus stop. Anyone over forty seems able to communicate only in terms of complaint and cynicism. And we

so easily get sucked into that mind-set. We groan and complain and bemoan our lot. “Where’s it all going to end?” we ask. “Why is no-one listening to me?” We have lost any sense of hope, any idea of optimism, any glimmer of a brighter future in store. But we **do** know where it’s going to end.

Because the New Testament, the narrative of the Holy Spirit’s work and activity, is a story of hope. It shines from every page. It throbs in every sentence. As Leon Morris puts it: “*There is a strong emphasis on hope, an emphasis we should not miss in an age so lacking in hope.*” Remember those first Christians on the morning of Pentecost, together in an upstairs room with no real idea of what was going to happen to them, no sense of a future mission other than the brief commission Jesus had given them. The hope that Jesus had given them in his teaching almost completely drained out of them by the emotional roller-coaster of the last few weeks, and most recently affected by the disappearance of their Lord and Leader back into heaven.

Then came the Holy Spirit – burning, roaring, gushing with hope. A new future beckoned, a future alive with hope for the here and now and for the eternity which stretched before them. They were transformed by it. They could see now what their mission really was; they could sense that there was a reason for what had happened; they **knew** that they could now enter into life in all its fullness. And so their preaching, their writing their living would be full of hope. Not the tentative hope that we express on a grey morning that the sun might come out later, but the certain hope that Jesus Christ had prepared a future for them, had secured their salvation, had given them a message and a mission that was so amazing everyone had to hear it. They become a people of hope. C E B Cranfield, in his commentary on *Romans*, writes that hope is “*perhaps that characteristic that has at all times most strikingly distinguished the authentic Christian from his pagan neighbours.*” We are people of hope, of optimism, whose life should stand out in a culture so devoid of hope, so full of cynicism and complaint. And if we are touched by the Holy Spirit, then that should be obvious.

2. **HOLINESS** (v16)

Paul writes here of his converts among the Gentiles becoming “*an offering acceptable to God, sanctified [made holy] by the Holy Spirit*”. That’s the second thing we desperately need today – holiness. Paul mentions it here in the context of sacrifice – “*an offering acceptable to God*”. Such an offering was totally set apart for God’s exclusive use. For the Jews it was the offering of an animal in the cultic practices, the formal worship of their religion. As James Dunn says, “*Cultic sacrifice has been replaced by the sacrifice of committed day-to-day living in personal relationships*”. In other words, what Paul is saying here is that those who are touched by the Holy Spirit have devoted themselves and their daily lives in every particular to God. Their commitment and priorities are shaped by God’s own agenda.

But so often in the comfortable, rich, educated churches of the West, our commitment and priorities are set by the world around us. Through our work, our social relationships, our community activity, our reading and our entertainment, we find that our desire to serve God and him alone is greatly diminished. It becomes just another aspect of our cluttered lives. For an hour or so on Sundays we are set apart for God, we are “holy”. The rest of the week, God just has to compete for our attention with all the other things that we allow to influence our lifestyle and behaviour and attitudes. And then we cease to become the distinctive, authentic followers of Jesus Christ that we are meant to be. We merge into the great mass of people around us, with no real message and certainly no integrity with which to proclaim it. Even if we try to modify our behaviour, our attitudes soon begin to resurface.

Elsewhere in this letter, Paul writes about the way in which we should allow the Holy Spirit to cleanse us and transform our lives. In *Romans 12:1,2* he urges those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ to resist the temptation to conform to the world around, and to have their attitudes changed to reflect God’s priorities. The trouble is, as I know from my own personal experience, you have to keep doing it. A one-off transformation isn’t possible – it needs to keep happening, and you have to keep asking God to do it. That’s why when Paul talks about being filled with the Holy Spirit, he always uses continuous tenses –

“keep on being filled”. We often don’t realise just how far we have moved away from the holiness that God asks of us. If we want to make any progress as individuals or as a church, then we need to keep on asking God to send his Holy Spirit, to fill us continually, to remind us daily of our need of him. We cannot sort it out on our own.

3. POWER (v19)

Fortunately, we don’t have to. We have the help of the Holy Spirit; we have the **power** of the Holy Spirit. Paul links it here in v19 with “*signs and miracles*”. Of course, we don’t believe in all that today, do we? We don’t have the faith for it. If we want to try and justify it, we say that such things finished with the apostles. Or, if our missionary magazines try to get us to believe that miracles are still happening in other parts of the world, we say that it is just God’s way of showing himself in particularly godless cultures. Listen, folks – there are actually fewer really godless cultures in our world today than Western Europe.

But we still bewail the decline in the church. We experience a sense of helplessness. What can we do? Why is our society showing so many signs of secularism, paganism, reliance on other gods? That sense of hopelessness is creeping up on us again. We don’t like what we see happening around us. And so we revert to various programmes and schemes, attempts to **manage** the church back to life. We listen to the management gurus, the sociologists, the psychologists, to famous Christians from other places (mainly the USA) and try to do things their way. (Now, I’m not saying we shouldn’t look for insights in such places – just that we should not **rely** on such insights as our **only** means of going forward.) We attempt to do it all our own way, in our own strength.

Although we talk and sing about the Spirit’s power, we are rather fearful about it. We’ve just sung “*Show your power, O Lord*”, but I wouldn’t mind a small wager that most of us really hope he won’t! After all, we might then need to get to grips with holiness. We’ve just got everything running nicely here, with new buildings, an office, programmes and diaries on the computer, people assigned to this, that and the other task. And it all seems to be going along very nicely. The last thing we want is the Holy Spirit coming and messing it all up. It’s unknown, radical, explosive. It’s what happened on that first Pentecost Sunday – just after the followers of Jesus had sorted out who was going to succeed Judas and had begun to organise themselves properly.

I’m not usually given to quoting from Nazis, but a comment from Goebbels seems appropriate here. Writing about Adolf Hitler in the early days of his rise to power, Goebbels commented, “*This man is dangerous; he believes what he says.*” What if we actually **believed** what we sing and say and pray? What if we believed in the power of the Holy Spirit? What if when we prayed “*Come, Holy Spirit*”, we did actually want him to come? What if when we sang “*Fill me again, Spirit of the Lord*” a few minutes ago, we did really think that would happen? I tell you, there would be no stopping us having a transforming effect on this community.

And this isn’t about power for power’s sake. This isn’t about doing all sorts of amazing tricks to entertain each other or to impress non-Christians. This is about power for witnessing, power for making a difference, power for building God’s Kingdom here in Lichfield, power to live holy lives, power to shine with hope, power to bring glory to God. It’s not a power to fear, but a power to encourage and strengthen, a power to deepen our faith, a power to build us up and to give us confidence in God. And, finally, it is a power that helps us to love, and God wants us to do just that.

4. LOVE (v30)

The final mention that Paul gives to the Holy Spirit in this passage reminds us that love is at the heart of it all. He writes of “*the love of the Spirit*” in v30. That phrase could be taken one of three ways, but pretty

well everyone agrees that Paul's Greek and the context here mean that it's about the love that the Spirit brings about in Christians. It is that *agaph*-love that is sacrificial and selfless. We live in an increasingly individualistic culture – another aspect of our growing godlessness – which means that we all look to our own rights, we think of ourselves first and insist that we get what we believe to be ours by right. It's a trait that is inherent in our human nature, but until fairly recently it was held in check by our laws and the conventions of a basically Judaeo-Christian culture. Our laws now elevate the individual and his or her rights above pretty well everything else.

Paul writes here of his "*struggle*" in which he hopes others will join. He asks for support in prayer, he seeks a demonstration of that love that is a mark of the Holy Spirit's presence. For Paul, that is a very important aspect of our Christian life. We have already said that joy is a distinctive characteristic of the Christian, but the New Testament is pretty clear that love is up there along with it. It is the main feature of a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led life. Paul's best known and most comprehensive writing on the effects of the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of Christians and the life of the Church is to be found in *1 Corinthians 12*, but that great chapter on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and all the wonderful effects he can have on the life of the Christian ends with these words, "*And now I will show you **the most excellent** way*". He then goes on into that well-known chapter on love. This is what it's all about, he says. You have the Holy Spirit – and if you do, then love will be the major evidence of it.

And what he is saying there is just what Jesus himself said to his followers before he left them. In his gospel, John records a long conversation that Jesus had the night before he was arrested, a conversation in which he tried to get them to understand that he would not be with them much longer and they would need to carry on his work. In *John 13:34,35* he says this, "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*" Love is a mark of Spirit-filled lives and will stand out in a culture that is self-absorbed, self-obsessed.

Now, Paul doesn't say all that explicitly in this passage, but he uses those four little phrases tucked away amongst the main points that he is making. And the way he uses them really shows that he more or less takes for granted these aspects of the Holy Spirit's activity. He would expect all Christians who have been touched by the Holy Spirit to exhibit them. I'm sure we all think that we do, but I'm sure, too, that we could do with a lot more of it. Are you open to the Holy Spirit's activity in your life? Are you willing for him to fill you afresh this morning? Are you prepared to be touched by the power of the Holy Spirit, a power that can help you become more holy, that can give you a greater hope, that can be demonstrated in a deeper love for those around you? Our society needs us to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This church needs us to be filled with the Holy Spirit. God needs us to be filled with the Holy Spirit, so that he can work in and through us to bring about his purposes. How about asking him to do it this morning – and believing that he will?

(Discussion notes follow on next page)

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Questions for discussion

1. Why should the Christian's hope distinguish him/her from the rest of society? What does hope mean for you?
2. What do you understand "holiness" to mean? How can we demonstrate holiness in our daily lives?
3. Why do we fear the power of the Holy Spirit? If we don't fear it, what is stopping us experiencing it in all its fullness? What difference might it make to our lives, our church and our community?
4. "Love" appears to be at the heart of all religions and is a quality everyone would like to see more of. What is distinctive about Christian love? How should we be showing it in our life together? What prevents us doing that?