

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

When the preacher read out this text from Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue everyone’s eyes were fixed on him. They were fixed on his hands, strong ingrained workman’s hands, not a bit like a preacher’s; they knew him to be the carpenter in Nazareth. Regularly they must have seen him about the village, delivering wood, repaired furniture, or newly made wooden tools. Everyone would know the local carpenter and his father too. People in villages know everyone and Nazareth was not much more than a village.

So here was the local carpenter up in the pulpit. We know this was not his first time preaching. He had toured the countryside preaching and winning himself a glowing reputation. No wonder, then, the Nazareth congregation assembled with something of an expectation, tinged probably with resentment for him not preaching here before.

The preacher did not disappoint. If it wasn’t for his hands and the fact that everyone knew him, he did not look like a carpenter. He certainly did not sound or act like a carpenter. He was an arresting preacher – his diction, his tone, his voice, his message, those eyes, his whole presence. Yet they knew him as Joseph’s son. So what could he possibly say to them!

He would have had nothing to say but for the experience that followed after he closed the door of the carpenter’s shop for the last time – nothing that is in comparison to his preaching after the experience of his Baptism, deep as was his communion with his Father and incredible his insight into people’s hearts and minds. It was a massive turning point in his life. He was a skilled carpenter but without devaluing the work of carpenters his life had been limited. He was little known outside the confines of Nazareth. But he was called to the public stage. His name was to be on everyone’s lips. And this change from obscurity to public prominence did not just happen. He did not just transfer from carpenter to preacher, teacher and healer. He was chosen, appointed and equipped at a particular time and place.

Shutting up the carpentry business he trekked to the River Jordan, there to associate himself with the moral reform movement that was shaking the country under the leadership of John the Baptist. Crowds were being baptised by John and Jesus wanted to be one of them. And when he did step forward to be baptised by John, what happened beggars description. Only symbols can convey, very unsatisfactorily, what did happen. “He saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him, and a voice spoke from heaven: “Thou art my Son, my Beloved; on you my favour rests.” He was never the same again. He wasn’t now a carpenter. He had become a Man of the Spirit. Go back to that Nazareth synagogue that Sabbath day when all the people listened amazed at what they heard from their local ex-carpenter. Don’t look at the strong hands. Don’t ask questions about who he is, about his family background. Just listen to what he is saying:

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I haven’t personally seen, only seen by pictures, Michelangelo’s painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. God the creator is reaching down to touch with the tip of his finger the tip of the finger of Adam giving him life. We can see the Holy Spirit as the hand of God, the very finger of God, reaching out through Christ, and through those who own his name, to touch, with the finger tip, to help, support and guide. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus’ ministry with the blind, the lame, the warped, the diseased, the lepers, the men and women in the gutters of society. The Holy Spirit is God at work. Jesus became the man of the Spirit.

I am confident that we are all familiar with the story of Jesus’ Baptism. Anyone interested or knowledgeable of biblical study would be. What I am more interested this morning is what it means to be a person of the Spirit. I can clearly remember, from a very unmemorable diocesan study day a long time ago, an interesting discussion on this subject – what does being of the Holy Spirit mean to you? The answers we gave, in my small group, if I remember correctly, were all predictable – living by the fruits of the spirit, not being hypocritical, always thinking good things, being holy. But one person’s reply to: what does being of the Holy Spirit mean to you (?) clearly stands out. He said: “Mrs Wentworth!” quoting from Rev Barry Overend’s Times Best Sermon of 1996. “Mrs Wentworth!” Mrs Wentworth – who was she? None of the rest of us had ever heard of Mrs Wentworth! But Overend, in his sermon, claimed she was a woman of transparent goodness. And we knew at once what he meant. A somewhat hazy, vague, unclear concept had come into full focus. The Holy Spirit seemed to have a human face, only familiar to one of the group but we somehow were able to bring to mind our own versions of Mrs Wentworth.

I think we half expect the dynamic of the Spirit to be operative, if anywhere, in such ecclesiastical activities as preaching, the Eucharist and the life of the Church. We construct theologies about the Spirit’s operation there and nowhere else. People of the Spirit are deeply religious, observe religious ritual with their life bound up with the Church. But turning the page of the Book of Acts from the first Pentecost we come across something strikingly different. There is absolutely nothing ecclesiastical here. There is a man lying on the Temple steps with hands outstretched, begging; someone who had never been able to walk, someone dumped there every morning and collected every evening. That was the life he knew and because he had occupied that site for so long he was invisible as a person, just a thing, part of the floor space. That is until two men of the Spirit came by. Peter and John saw differently.

So did Mrs Wentworth apparently. I have come across may be one or two Mrs Wentworths in my life. You may well have too. Mrs Wentworth seems to have been let into a sort of secret – a secret of how to wear your success without arrogance and to bear failures without resentment, how to admire without envy, reproach without malice, care without condescending and love without lusting. And above all to pray without pretence, what the Book of Common Prayer describes quaintly but so elegantly as neither ‘dissembling nor cloaking our manifold sins and wickedness’.

Accepting with equal grace both deserved praise and justified criticism. Saying sorry to God, or to a neighbour and meaning just that. Not “I’m sorry but I have been under a lot of stress, or pressure of work, or having trouble at home, or problems with our 14 year old, or the dog which had to be put down last week. And you know how it is when everything gets on top of you, you just blow your top. No nonsense, just I am sorry

Yes, saying sorry is part of being a person of the Spirit. A person of the Spirit is NOT perfect. Transparently good Mrs Wentworth (or the version of her known to us) may be, or have been, but she has her faults. And living in the Spirit is not obvious to them. You see, seeing ourselves in a shining light obscures not illuminates the vision of God, it hides our work in the Spirit. Those people of the Spirit don’t shine, they reflect. They reflect the glory of God whom one day they shall see.

Let me relate a simple but true story from America. A woman was in a hospital lift visiting a friend who was making a good recovery. On the way up the lift stopped to admit a nurse and a young man cringing in pain. ‘Take us straight up to the operating floor’ said the nurse to the lift attendant. As he did so the boy turned an agonised face on the visiting woman and gasped; ‘Lady, can you pray? I’m scared. This has all happened so fast.’ Surprised at her own calm, she grasped his outstretched hands and prayed: ‘Our heavenly Father, come close to this boy. Be with him, give him courage, take away his fear. Stay with him constantly, through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ The lift stopped at the top floor. ‘You pray now’ she said to the boy. But he shook his head.’ Say a little prayer then which your mother taught you.’ The lift attendant made no move to open the doors. The boy did pray. It was very simple. Then the doors slid back and the nurse helped him painfully towards the operating room. Next day the lady was visiting her friend again. All at once she was aware of the nurse she had met in the lift. ‘How is the boy?’ she asked, ‘You know’ replied the nurse, ‘we are not supposed to say what goes on in hospitals but I have special permission this time. Just before the boy went under the anaesthetic he said,, “Please tell the lady in the lift that I am not scared now, and I think I feel God close to me.”. ‘O, how wonderful’ came the quick response. ‘How is he?’ ‘When can I see him?’ To which she replied, ‘Everything was done for him but he died peacefully during the operation.’

Have I been touching on the simple actions and attitudes in focusing on the Holy Spirit? Yes I have. We make the mistake if we connect the Divine Spirit only with complicated theologies and charismatic accomplishments. The Holy Spirit is behind everything that is human and humanitarian. Jesus showed this so clearly. Obviously, so too did Mrs Wentworth. Have I focused on what it means to be a person of the Spirit? Yes I have, deliberately, with the aim of focusing more, in my future preaching, on the Holy Spirit. Have I succeeded in my aim to make you think more about the Holy Spirit at work? That is for you to decide.