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Inciting Insight: The Holy Spirit

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The Holy Spirit in the Church

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I am delighted to be speaking at this first Fulcrum conference, and am very grateful to Francis Bridger and his colleagues for inviting me, and to Graham Kings and the staff here at St Mary's for their hospitality. It is twenty-five years since I last spoke here, at one of the old Islington Conferences, and I trust I shall look back on this day with as much pleasure as I now look back on that one.

I want you to imagine for a moment that you have just thrown open the window on a glorious spring morning. A fresh breeze is stirring around the garden. In the distance there is a crackle of bonfire as a farmer clears away some winter rubbish. Out in the field, a skylark is hovering over its nest. All around, there is a sense of creation throwing off its wintry coverings and getting ready for an outburst of new life.

All these are images the early Christians used to describe something strange but real and central to their lives. They spoke of a powerful wind rushing through the house and entering them. They spoke of tongues of fire resting on them and transforming them. They picked up, from the ancient creation story, the image of a bird brooding over the waters of chaos to bring order and life to birth.

How else do you explain the inexplicable, except in a rush of images from the world we already know?

There was something to explain, all right. Jesus' followers were clearly as puzzled by his resurrection as they had been by much of what he had been saying to them. They were unsure what they were supposed to do next. They were unclear what *God* was going to do next. At one point, they went back to their fishing. At another point, the last time they saw Jesus before he disappeared from sight for the last time, they were still asking him about whether all these strange goings-on meant that the old dream of Israel was going to come true after all. Was this the time, they asked, when Israel would receive the kingdom, would be free at last in the sense they and their contemporaries had been hoping for?

As so often, Jesus doesn't answer their question directly. (Many of the questions we ask God can't be answered directly, not because God doesn't know the answers but because our questions don't in fact make sense.) He gently puts them off. 'It isn't for you,' he says, 'to know the

times and periods which the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1.6-8)

The Holy Spirit; and the task of the church. The two march together hand in hand. We can't talk about them apart. Despite what you might think from some excited talk in the last generation about new spiritual experiences, God doesn't give people the Holy Spirit in order to let them enjoy the spiritual equivalent of a day at Alton Towers. Of course, if you're downcast and gloomy, the fresh wind of God's Spirit can and often does give you a new perspective on everything and, above all, a sense of God's presence, love, comfort and even joy. But the point of the Spirit is to enable those who follow Jesus to take into all the world the news that he is Lord, that he has won the victory over the forces of evil, that a new world has opened up and that we are to help make it happen.

Equally, the task of the church cannot be attempted without the Spirit. I have sometimes heard Christian people talk as though, having done what he's done in Jesus, God now wants us to do our part by getting on with things under our own steam. But that is a tragic misunderstanding, and leads either to arrogance or to burnout, or both. Without God's Spirit, there is nothing we can do that will count for God's kingdom. Without God's Spirit, the church simply can't be the church.

The wind and the fire and the brooding bird are given, then, to enable God's people to *be* God's people. This has a surprising and dramatic effect. The Spirit is given so that we, ordinary mortals that we are, can ourselves be, in a measure, what Jesus himself was: part of God's future arriving in the present; a place where heaven and earth meet; the means of God's kingdom going forwards. The Spirit is given, in fact, so that the church can share in the life and continuing work of Jesus himself, now that he has gone into God's dimension, i.e. heaven. (The 'Ascension' is about just that: Jesus going ahead into God's sphere, into God's future, against the day when heaven and earth become one, and he is once more personally present in the new, combined, heaven-and-earth.)

These points deserves to be explored a little further. First, the future arriving in the present.

II

The Spirit is given to make God's future real in the present. That is the first, and perhaps the most important, point to grasp about the work of this strange personal power for which so many images are used. Just as the resurrection of Jesus opened up the unexpected world of God's new creation, so the Spirit comes to us from that new world, the world waiting to be born, the world in which, according to the old prophets, peace and justice will flourish, and the wolf and the lamb will lie down side by side. One key element of living as a Christian is learning to live with the life, and by the rules, of God's future world, even as we are continuing to live within the present one, in what Paul calls 'the present evil age' and Jesus 'this corrupt and sinful generation'.

That is why St Paul, our earliest Christian writer, speaks of the Spirit as the *guarantee* or the *down-payment* of what is to come. The Greek word he uses is *arrabon*, which in modern Greek means an engagement-ring, a sign in the present of what is to come in the future.

Paul speaks of the Spirit as the guarantee of our 'inheritance' (Ephesians 1.14). This idea of 'inheritance' should not be squashed into the little boxes we might at first imagine. Paul is not simply using an image taken from the ordinary human transaction whereby, when someone dies, someone else inherits their wealth - an 'inheritance' from which one might perhaps receive something in advance, a first installment. Nor is he simply speaking, as many Christians have supposed, of our 'going to heaven', as though celestial bliss were the full 'inheritance' God had in mind for us. No. Heaven is important, but it isn't the end of the world. Paul is drawing on a major biblical theme, and developing it in a striking new direction. To grasp this is to see, much more clearly than we often do, why the Spirit is given in the first place, and indeed who the Spirit actually is.

The major biblical theme upon which Paul is drawing when he speaks of the 'inheritance' to come, of which the Spirit is given as a first installment, is the Exodus story, in which Israel is rescued from Egypt and goes off to the promised land. Canaan, the land we now call the Holy Land, was their promised 'inheritance', the place where they would live as God's people, where - provided they maintained their side of the covenantal agreement - God would live with them and they with God. As both the foretaste of that promise, and the means by which they were led to inherit it, God went with them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, the strange holy Presence which guided and directed their wanderings and grieved over their rebellions on the way.

So when Paul speaks of the Spirit in the present as the 'guarantee of our inheritance', he is evoking, as Jesus himself had done, this whole Exodus tradition, the story which began with Passover and ended with the Promised Land, in order to say: You are now the people of the true Exodus. You are now on your way to your inheritance. But that inheritance isn't simply one small country among others. *The whole world is now God's holy land.* At the moment it appears as a place of suffering and sorrow as well as of power and beauty. But God is reclaiming it. That is what Jesus' death and resurrection were all about. And you are called to be part of that reclaiming. One day all creation will be rescued from slavery, from the corruption, decay and death which deface its beauty, destroy its relationships, remove the sense of God's presence from it, and make it a place of injustice, violence and brutality. That rescue, that transformation, is the message at the heart of one of the greatest chapters Paul ever wrote, the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans.

So what does it mean to say that this future has begun to arrive in the present? What Paul means is that those who follow Jesus, those who find themselves believing that he is the world's true Lord, that he rose from the dead - these people are given the Spirit as a foretaste of what that new world will be like. If anyone is 'in the Messiah', what they have and are is - new creation! (2 Corinthians 5.17) Your own human self, your personality, your body, is being reclaimed, so that instead of being simply part of the old creation, a place of sorrow and injustice and ultimately the shame of death itself, you can be *both* part of the new creation in advance *and* someone through whom it begins to happen here and now.

What does this say about the Holy Spirit? It says that the Spirit plays the same role in our pilgrimage from Passover to the promised land - from Jesus' resurrection, in other words, to the final moment when all creation will be renewed - that was played in the old story by the pillar of cloud and fire. The Spirit is the strange, personal presence of the living God himself, leading, guiding, warning, rebuking, grieving over our failings and celebrating our small steps towards the true inheritance.

But if the Spirit is the personal presence of God himself, what does this say about us as Christians? Let Paul again give the answer. You, he says, are the Temple of the living God.

III

If the Spirit is the one who brings God's future into the present, the Spirit is also the one who joins heaven and earth together. To understand this, we need to remind ourselves of one of the basic building-blocks of biblical theology: that God and the world, heaven and earth, are neither the same thing, as in pantheism, nor separated by a great gulf, as in Deism, but that they interrelate in a variety of complex and usually surprising ways. By grasping this we may avoid the two common misunderstandings of who the Spirit is, misunderstandings which arise when Christians have tried to fit the experience of the Spirit into one of the main alternative models of how heaven and earth relate to one another.

Within pantheism, and even within panentheism, speaking of God's Spirit at work within us appears easy. If something we can call 'God' is within everything, talking of God's Spirit is just another way of saying the same thing. This seems fine and, in our modern world, 'democratic'. We don't like to think that God would be more particularly in and with some people or places than others; it offends our post-enlightenment western sensibilities. I well remember the first pantheist I

ever encountered, a girl I met while hitch-hiking half the length of British Columbia in the summer of 1968. 'Of course Jesus is divine,' she said. 'But so am I. So are you. So is my pet rabbit.' For some reason it was the pet rabbit that stuck in my mind.

Now I have nothing against pet rabbits. But to say that God's Spirit is in and with a pet rabbit *in the same sense* that God's Spirit was in and with Jesus, and indeed in and with his people, struck me, and still strikes me, as absurd, not to say thoroughly reductionist. That's the trouble with pantheism. It leaves you where you are. You already have all that there is. There is not only no solution to evil. There is no future beyond where we now are. If pantheism is true, Jesus was indeed a deluded fanatic.

Some form of Deism might seem at first sight a better context for understanding the idea of God's fresh, fiery rushing wind. After all, if God's sphere and ours are utterly different places, how wonderful, how exciting, how dramatic, to think of a power coming all the way from God's distant world to ours - to us - to me! This is where the language about 'natural' and 'supernatural' has played, for many people in our world, a key role. Assuming something like Deism as a basic framework, they have gone on to suppose that everything in our sphere is 'natural', to be explained by the ordinary laws of nature, physics, history and so on, and that everything in God's sphere is 'supernatural', entirely Other, completely unlike our ordinary experience. (I know that the words 'natural' and 'supernatural' have a longer and more interesting history than this last sentence might imply, but I am talking about the way in which the words are commonly used today.) That is why people who have assumed a worldview in which heaven and earth are normally utterly separated have looked for evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and work, not in a quiet growth of moral wisdom, a steady, undramatic lifetime of selfless service, but in spectacular, 'supernatural' events such as healings, speaking in tongues, wonderful conversions and so on.

Please note: I am *not* saying that healings and 'tongues' do not happen, or do not matter. They do, and they do. I am not saying that God does not sometimes convert people with wonderful suddenness. He does. What I am saying is that the utter separation of heaven and earth sets up the wrong framework for understanding what is going on in all these things. In particular, it excludes the grain of truth which the pantheist has glimpsed and then made the sole feature of that scheme: that sense of God's presence and power already within the 'natural' world. I go back again and again to Manley Hopkins: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God' - that is a given, heaven and earth already full of God's glory - and yet the world has been spoiled and darkened, and for the morning to break again upon it the Holy Ghost must brood over the bent world as over the chaos at the beginning. Somehow we have to say both. We must never forget, as the New Testament writers never forgot, that the Spirit given afresh on the day of Pentecost (we'll come to that in a minute) is the same Spirit who brooded over the waters of chaos at the beginning. Somehow we are committed to saying *both* that the Spirit is the same Spirit who was active in the world all along, and especially in Israel (inspiring the prophets, for instance), *and* that the Spirit is given in a new way through the death and resurrection of Jesus and through faith in him. John puts this latter point dramatically: there was no Spirit as yet, he says, because Jesus was not glorified (7.39). But it is John, no less than Paul, who sees that what is accomplished through Jesus and the Spirit is precisely the *renewal* of creation, not its abandonment.

Neither of those frameworks will do as the setting for understanding what the New Testament says about the Spirit. For that, we need the biblical framework instead. Somehow, God's dimension and our dimension, heaven and earth, overlap and interlock. All the questions we want to ask - How does this happen, who does it happen to, when, where, why, under what conditions, what does it look like when it does - all these remain partly mysterious, and will do until creation is finally renewed and the two spheres, the two dimensions, joined into one as they were designed to be (and as Christians pray daily that they will be). But the point of talking about the Spirit in this framework ought by now to be clear. If it wasn't, St Paul would rub our noses in it: those in whom the Spirit comes to live are God's renewed Temple. They are, individually and corporately, locations where heaven and earth meet.

One or two things must be said about this straight off.

First, the obvious retort. 'It doesn't look like that to me!' Most of us, thinking even of those Christians to whom we look up as examples, find it difficult to imagine that this person really is a walking Temple, a place where heaven and earth meet. Most of us have even more difficulty thinking of *ourselves* in that way. We certainly find it hard, looking at all the tragic nonsense that has marred the history of Christianity, to see the church as a whole in this light. But the counter-retort is equally obvious to anyone who knows the writings of St Paul. *He could see the failings of the church, and of individual Christians, just as much as we can.* And it is in one of the letters where those failings are most embarrassingly obvious - the first letter to Corinth - where he makes the claim. You corporately, he says to the whole church, are God's Temple, and God's Spirit dwells within you (3.16). That's why the unity of the church matters so much. Your bodies, he says to them one by one, are Temples of the Holy Spirit within you (6.19). That's why bodily holiness, not least sexual holiness, matters so much. Unity and holiness have been two great problems for the church in the last generation. Could it be that we need to recapture Paul's bracing teaching about our vocation to be Temples of the Holy Spirit?

IV

Once we glimpse this vision of the Holy Spirit coming to live within human beings, making them personally and corporately Temples of the living God - and making us shiver in our shoes, I hope, at the thought of it - we are able to grasp the point of the Spirit's work in several other ways as well.

To begin with, building on the startling call to holiness we just noticed, we notice right across the early Christian writings the notion that those who follow Jesus are called to fulfil the Law - the Torah, the Jewish Law. Paul says it; James says it; Jesus himself says it. Now of course, as we all know, there are many senses in which Christians do not, and are not meant to, perform the Jewish Law. The Letter to the Hebrews insists that with the death of Jesus the sacrificial system came to an end, and with it the whole point of the Temple. Paul insists that when pagan males believe the gospel and get baptized they do *not* have to get circumcised, despite enormous pressure from Jewish communities. Jesus himself hinted strongly that the food laws which had marked out the Jews from their pagan neighbours were to be set aside in favour of a different kind of marking out, a different kind of holiness.

Nevertheless, the sense that the Law, the Torah, is still to be fulfilled, is very strong in the early Christian writings, not least in passages where the Spirit is being invoked. If you are guided and energised by the Spirit, declares Paul, you will no longer do those things which the Law forbids - murder, adultery, theft and the rest. 'The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God's Law,' he writes. 'Such a mindset does not submit to God's Law, indeed it can't; and those of that sort cannot please God.' But, as he goes on at once, 'You are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if God's Spirit does indeed dwell in you' (note the Temple-language again). The Spirit will give life, resurrection life, to all those who are indwelt by the Spirit; and this is to be anticipated (future-in-the-present language again) in holiness of life here and now. (Romans 8.7-17) Later in the same letter, he explains further: 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the Law' (Romans 13.10).

But the point, once again, is not that the Law is a convenient moral guide, ancient and venerable. It is that the Torah, like the Temple, *is one of the points at which heaven and earth meet*, so that, as the Rabbis taught, those who study and keep Torah are like those who worship in the Temple. And the early Christians are encouraging one another to live precisely as points of intersection, points of overlap, between heaven and earth. Again, this sounds fearsomely difficult, not to say downright impossible. But there is no getting around it.

The fulfilment of Torah by the Spirit is one of the main themes, though not often noticed, underneath the spectacular description, in Acts 2, of the Day of Pentecost itself. To this day, Pentecost is observed in Judaism as the feast of the giving of Torah. First comes Passover, the day when the Israelites leave their Egyptian slavery behind for good. Off they go through the desert, and fifty days later they come to Mount Sinai. There, Moses goes up the mountain, and comes down with the Law, the tablets of the covenant, God's gift to his people of the way of life by

which they will be able to demonstrate that they really are his people.

This is the picture we ought to have in mind as we read Acts 2. The previous Passover, Jesus had died and been raised, opening the way out of slavery, the way to forgiveness and a new start, for the whole world, more particularly for all who follow him. Now, fifty days later, Jesus has been taken into 'heaven', into God's dimension of reality; but, like Moses, he comes down again, to ratify the renewed covenant and to provide that way of life, not now (as Paul says) on tablets of stone but to be written on human hearts, by which the followers of Jesus may demonstrate, in gratitude, that they really are his people. That is the underlying theology by which the remarkable phenomenon of Pentecost as Luke tells it - the wind, the fire, the tongues, and the sudden, powerful proclamation of Jesus to the astonished crowds - is given its deepest meaning. Those in whom the Spirit comes to dwell are to be people who live at the intersection between heaven and earth.

Nor is it only Temple and Torah that are fulfilled by the Spirit. There are two other ways in which, in the language of ancient Judaism, God was at work within the world - ways on which many early Christians drew to speak about what had happened, uniquely and decisively, in Jesus. They spoke of Temple, Torah, Spirit - and also God's Word and God's Wisdom.

V

First, God's Word. When the first disciples were sent off by Jesus into the wider world to announce that he was Israel's Messiah and hence the world's true Lord, they knew that their message would make little or no sense to most of their hearers. It was an affront to Jewish people to tell them that Israel's Messiah had arrived - and that the Romans had crucified him, not least because the Jewish leaders hadn't wanted to accept him. It was sheer madness, something to provoke sniggers or worse, to tell non-Jews that there was a single true God who was calling the whole world to account through a man whom he had sent and whom he had raised from the dead. And yet they discovered that telling this story carried a power, a power they regularly associated with the Spirit, but which they simply referred to as the Word. 'Filled with the Holy Spirit, they spoke God's Word with boldness.' 'The Word of God continued to spread.' 'The Word of God continued to advance and gain adherents.' 'The Word of God grew mightily and prevailed.' (Acts 4.31; 6.7; 12.24; 19.20)

Paul speaks this way, too. 'When you received the Word of God from us,' he writes, 'you accepted it not as a human word, but as what it really is, God's Word which is also at work in you believers.' This is 'the Word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world.' (1 Thessalonians 2.13; Colossians 1.5-6) This last passage gives us another hint that the Word is old as well as new: 'bearing fruit and growing' is a direct allusion to the language of the first creation, of Genesis 1. 'By the Word of YHWH were the heavens made,' sang the Psalmist, 'and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.' Yes, reply the early Christians, and this same Word is now at work through the good news, the 'gospel', the message that declares Jesus as the risen Lord. 'The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart; because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' (Psalm 33.6; Romans 10.8-9.) In other words, when you announce the good news that the risen Jesus is Lord, that very word is the Word of God, *a carrier or agent of God's Spirit*, a means by which, as Isaiah had predicted, new life from God's dimension comes to bring new creation within ours (Isaiah 40.8; 55.10-13).

So too with Wisdom. Wisdom was already thought of, within Judaism, as God's agent in creation. John, Paul and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews all draw on this idea to speak of Jesus as the one through whom the world was made. But it doesn't stop there. Paul, like the book of Proverbs, goes on to speak of this same Wisdom being accessible to humans through the power of God's Spirit; and, as in Proverbs, part of the point about Wisdom is that it's what you need to live a fully, genuinely human life. It is not, he says, a wisdom 'of this age', that is, of the present world and the way it sees things. It does not conform to the kind of wisdom the rulers of the present world like to acknowledge. Instead, 'we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.' What God has given us is access to a new kind of

wisdom, *through the Spirit*. (1 Corinthians 2.6-13) All God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in the Messiah himself, so that those who belong to the Messiah have this wisdom accessible to them, and hence the chance to proceed to mature human and Christian living: 'It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in the Messiah.' (Colossians 1.28; 2.2-3) At this point, too, those who are indwelt by the Spirit are called to be people who live at, and by, the intersection of heaven and earth. Please note: only those who operate within an essentially Deist framework could ever think of someone being 'so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use'. Within biblical theology, the way to be truly of use on this earth is to be genuinely heavenly minded - and to live as one of the places where, and the means by which, heaven and earth overlap. The Spirit is given to make us truly, gloriously, wisely *human*; and part of the renewed human task is, as at the beginning, to be once more God's stewards over creation, the people through whom God will bring his world into its appointed and glorious order at last.

That is how the church is to carry forward the work of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles, referring back to Luke's earlier volume, i.e. the Gospel, says that in that previous book the writer had described 'all that Jesus *began* to do and teach.' The implication is clear: that the story of the church, led and energized by the power of the Spirit, is the story of Jesus continuing to do and to teach - through his Spirit-led people. Once more, that is why we pray that God's kingdom will come, and his will be done, 'on earth as it is in heaven'. One of the central Spirit-texts in the New Testament is Jesus' promise in John 20.21: 'Receive the Holy Spirit; As the Father sent me, so I send you.' The Spirit is given so that we will be for the world what Jesus was for Israel. Our task is not to repeat what Jesus did, but to *implement* his *achievement*. That is at the heart of Christian mission.

VI

I hope it is clear by now that what is on offer through the gift of God's own Spirit is nothing less than the anticipation of new creation, the time when heaven and earth will be one, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. This is at the heart of all Christian mission in the world and all Christian living, with the latter serving the former - Mission-Shaped Church, indeed. Let me, in conclusion, follow this through in three areas which I believe come into sharper focus when we approach things this way.

First, beauty. God has promised that, through his Spirit, he will remake the creation so that it becomes what it is straining and yearning to be. All the beauty of the present world will be enhanced, ennobled, set free from that which at present corrupts and defaces it. Then there will appear that beauty for which the beauty we know here and now is simply an advance signpost. The task of being God's people, indwelt by God's spirit, thus includes as a central element, not simply as a pretty but irrelevant border around the edge, the task of celebrating and creating beauty. Led by the Spirit, we are to use our God-given creativity to find new ways forwards. Christian approaches to aesthetics have often hovered uneasily between sentimental kitsch on the one hand and total avoidance on the other. But understanding the Spirit's work within the context of inaugurated eschatology opens up a different way forwards. The beauty of the present world is like the beauty of a chalice: it is beautiful in itself, yes, but far more beautiful because we know what it is meant to be filled with. It is like the beauty of a violin: again, beautiful in itself but still more because of the music we know it is designed to play. Because the Spirit will one day flood the whole of creation, our task as Spirit-filled Christians in the present is to use our differing creativities to anticipate that eventual beauty, both as mission and as celebration. Here is a theologically grounded agenda for all Christian artists, musicians, writers and so on.

Second, spirituality and relationships. God offers us here and now, by the Spirit, a fresh kind of relationship with himself - and, at the same time, a fresh kind of relationship with our neighbours and with the whole creation; and these belong in a tightly integrated whole. The renewal of human lives by the Spirit provides the energy through which damaged and fractured human beings and human relationships can, at least in principle, be mended and healed. God offers us, through the Spirit, the gift of being at last what we know in our bones we were meant to be: creatures that live in both dimensions of his created order. The quest for spirituality, which has become a major

feature of contemporary culture with the irony that everyone wants spirituality but nobody imagines they will find it in the church, now appears as a search for that coming together of heaven and earth which, deeply challenging though of course it is, is genuinely on offer to those who believe. And the quest for genuine human relationships, which becomes more and more urgent with every step of postmodern deconstruction and isolation, can be pursued through the Spirit's energy and gift in fresh, costly and creative ways.

Finally, justice. God holds out before us, and wants to anticipate here and now by the Spirit, a world put to rights, a world in which the good and joyful gift of justice has flooded creation. The work of the Spirit in the lives of individuals in the present time is designed to be another advance sign, a down payment and guarantee, of that eventual putting-to-rights of all things. We are justified in the present in order to bring God's justice to the world, against the day when, still by the operation of the Spirit, the earth is filled with the knowledge of YHWH as the waters cover the sea. It is by the Spirit, and by the Spirit alone, that we will see forgiveness put into practice as a fact about our global economy, that we will see fair trade replace so-called free trade, and that we will indeed make poverty history. It is by the Spirit that we will honour and respect the good earth from which we were taken and will work for the day when the mountains and hills will break forth into singing and all the trees of the forest will clap their hands. It is by the Spirit, implementing God's work of defeating evil on the cross and launching new creation at Easter, that God's future will come into God's present world, that God's kingdom will come and his will be done on earth as in heaven.

What then can we say about the Christian understanding of God within which this language of Spirit makes the wonderful sense it does?

God is the creator and lover of the world. Jesus spoke of God as 'the Father who sent me', indicating that, as he says elsewhere, 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'. Look hard at Jesus, especially as he goes to his death, and you will discover more about God than you could ever have guessed from studying the infinite shining heavens or the moral law within your own conscience. God is the one who satisfies the passion for justice, the longing for spirituality, the hunger for relationships, the yearning for beauty. And then re-read the Farewell Discourses in John, and discover that, by the Spirit, those who follow Jesus are to become part of that same life.

And God, the true God, is the God we see in Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's Messiah, the world's true Lord, and in the Spirit which he sends. The earliest Christians spoke of God and Jesus in the same breath - and, of course, the word 'breath' is *pneuma*, the same word as 'Spirit' - and, so to speak, on the same side of the equation. Paul wrote that if you want to know who the real God is, as opposed to the non-gods of paganism, you must think in terms of the God who, to fulfil his age-old plan to rescue the world, sent first his Son and then the Spirit of his Son (Galatians 4.4-7). You either have the Trinity or you slide back into paganism. Although the church's official 'doctrine of the Trinity' was not fully formulated for another three or four centuries, when the later theologians eventually hammered it all out it turns out to consist, in effect, of detailed footnotes to Paul, John, Hebrews and the other New Testament books, with explanations designed to help later generations grasp what was already there in a nutshell in the earliest writings.

But it would be a mistake to give the impression that the Christian doctrine of God is a matter of clever intellectual word-games or mind-games. For Christians it's always a love-game: God's love for the world calling out an answering love from us, enabling us to discover that God not only happens to love us (as though this was simply one aspect of his character) but that he *is* love itself. That is what many theological traditions have explored as the very heart of God's own being, the love which passes continually between Father, Son and Spirit. Indeed, some have suggested that one way of understanding who the Spirit is is that the Spirit is the personal love which the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father - and that we are invited, by being indwelt by the Spirit, to have a share, ourselves, in this inner and loving life of God. That is why some of the most evocative names and descriptions of God in the New Testament are ways of drawing us in to this inner life: 'the one who searches the hearts,' writes Paul, 'knows what the Spirit is thinking, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people according to God's will.' (Romans 8.27) 'The heartsearcher'; there is a divine name to ponder. Perhaps that is the best place to

pause and reflect. God has given his Spirit to his people so that we can be the first-fruits of his new creation. And this does not happen without it happening to us at the very depths of our beings. Our hearts and lives are to be searched, swept, fired, brooded over by the wind, the fire, the dove. That is what it means to be the people in whom God's Spirit lives and works. That is what it means for the Holy Spirit to be present and active in the church.

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