# 03 The Holy Spirit in worship

*Readings: I Samuel 16:1-13; Romans 8:22 – 30; St John 16:12-15*
*Psalm 89 (plainsong)*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Two weeks ago we started thinking about worship – worship as one of humanity's privileges in the God-given scheme of things, a universal instinct which projects itself on to some sort of deity or some sort of idol, whether people think they're religious or not. Last week we looked at the difference Christ made to the worship of people conscious of their frailty and imperfection. He fulfilled the longings and rituals of old Israel, and at the same time superseded them – for he is both victim and priest. The old forms and structures are no longer binding; the fullness of worship is available not just in sacred buildings but wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Christ; and, most important of all, the whole motive of worship has changed. No longer do we gather to win favour from God, or to try to establish a better relationship through ritual and sacrifice. He has done that. Only he could do it. And we come in response to his initiative, out of gratitude for the love God the Father has already shown us in the life and death and rising of his Son.

From that point, with a view to the changes that are taking place in our building over these next few months, I had meant to move to the consideration of more practical aspects of worship. But there is one vital background factor that we haven't yet touched on, and this is the essential presence of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit breathing reality into what we do here, drawing our thoughts and minds back to our Creator, our liberation in Christ becomes itself a new formalism, a new structure, a new ritual.

Yet, as soon as we claim that the Holy Spirit is necessary to our worship, we run into problems – because clearly, in the very nature of things, the Spirit isn't something we can engineer. It is possible to have a service that's liturgically correct in every detail, with a logical sequence and fine music and impeccable leadership, and for the thing to fall totally flat and lack life. Conversely, it is possible to go to a service where everything is jumbled up and the hymns are unfamiliar, and everything is done differently from the way that we are accustomed to, a service that would score no marks at all in a liturgical exam at college – and still we can come away encouraged and uplifted because there has been a reality, a warmth, that has somehow transcended the muddle. So immediately two dangers open up. One is that we may be so obsessed with form and content that the one thing needful, the authentic Spirit, has no chance to penetrate. The other is that we may strive so hard to whip up mood and atmosphere and leave things so much to the last-minute guidance of the Spirit, that our worship becomes frothy and sloppy and completely lacking in any kind of intellectual or liturgical integrity. Depending on "the guidance of the Spirit" can for ministers become a glib excuse for failing to do any preparation; on the part of members, it expresses itself in the insidious Protestant heresy that it's only worth going to church "when you feel like it". We tend to think of worship as a ground-based activity generated by us – which is natural, because this is where we all start from. But it is more complete and biblical, I think, to see it as a circuit – starting from God who gives us the impulse to worship, being channelled through Christ the transformer, earthed in us who are the Church, and transmitted back again to God the source. Which can make God seem somewhat egotistical and self-important, if we think of him in human terms – until we realise that what he seeks is our fulfilment. The entire process points towards the day when the whole earth shall cry Glory, and creation shall find

its joy in worshipping its Maker. In the meantime he has given us the freedom to ignore him and to disbelieve in him, to turn away from him, to worship that which is not God.

In this circuit – through which we offer our love back to the source of all love – the power, the current bringing the whole thing to life, is God the Spirit. Paul expressed it very well when he said: "We don't even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God knows what the Spirit means." This Spirit is notoriously difficult to analyse or to define from Scripture. In the Old Testament he is associated mainly with charismatic individuals; in the New, he belongs to the whole Church. Yet we can come to church and have no sense of the Spirit at all. So how can we know whether he is really here or not?

I think that the best clue comes from Jesus himself, who said once that "the wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going". "Wind" in Hebrew is the same word as "Spirit" – and the wind is a good analogy for the atmosphere in which we worship. For the wind is no more than a stirring of the air by which we are continually surrounded. On a calm day you are not conscious of it – but we still all breathe it, we would die without it. When the isobars draw close together and the weather system is changing, we still breathe exactly the same air that's been around us all the time – but now it is dominant and obvious: buffeting, controlling us. Then things settle once more, and we say the wind has "dropped" – but we still breathe the air that we perceived as wind the day before. The Spirit is very much like air. Sometimes we are very conscious of him – I am sure we have all known services where he's been unmistakably active; at other times, in other acts of worship, we will not be conscious of his impact – but this doesn't mean he is not here. We depend on him no less on calm days than on windy days.

But there is one significant difference between wind and the Holy Spirit. When the wind gets up, it assails everyone, and no-one who's exposed to it is unaffected. The Spirit, by contrast, does not force himself on anyone. His method is not force but love. In terms of worship, this means that his effectiveness depends very largely on how receptive we are. This is one main reason why the setting and the atmosphere, the music and the mood of worship matter so much; and even more important than these things are our own attitudes and expectations. If we rush into a service, give ourselves no time to settle to what's going on, have to keep an eye on bus times all the way through or half our mind on what's going on in the oven, and then rush off at the end, the still small voice is not going to have much of a chance. If the leader has annoying mannerisms, or the prayers are self-consciously clever, this will draw our attention away from the source of worship and focus our minds on the wrong things. The first thing all of us should do when we come into church is settle, and relax, and pray – use the silence to remind ourselves whose house we are in and what we are about to become part of. If you have time to pray for the preacher too, that helps! So does prayer for the people round you. The more suffused our worship is with prayer, the more we are likely to be conscious of the Spirit's vital part in it.

The unpredictability, the sheer impossibility of trying to engineer the Holy Spirit, has one very positive advantage. This advantage is that in the Spirit we have quite extraordinary freedom. Worship that's most helpful to us will inevitably be shaped to a large extent by history and by culture and tradition. We all benefit from ritual and take comfort from the things that are familiar. But to be bound by tradition is to stifle the work of the Spirit, who always has more truth to teach us than we are able to absorb. Variety is central to the Church's worship. There is very little that's laid down by Christ, other than the celebration of the Sacrament, and there are very few absolute rights and wrongs. Some people are much

helped by spectacle and incense and the atmosphere of big occasions. Others find a simple and unstructured act of worship much more meaningful; and there is room for both. Indeed the same congregation, the same individuals, may be helped by both, if attitudes are flexible enough and eyes are open wide enough to find the different shafts of light that come through different windows. What is anti-Spirit is to claim that there is only one right way. The claustrophobic attitude that "this is how we've always done it" makes the Spirit's life-giving work almost impossible. Once we are able to arrange this building flexibly, and to use our PA system and our chairs and our new organ to have worship which is sometimes different from the norm that we have always known, I hope we will discover what great value sheer diversity can bring, how positive and liberating the great Comforter's work is.

To the God who has created us for worship and the Son who makes true worship possible, and to the Spirit who has led Christ's people to new insights through the generations, be all praise and glory through the Church in every place. Amen

*Rev David M Beckett*