

“THE CREATIVE SPIRIT”

Exodus 31:1-11

In these few weeks following on from Pentecost, we’re having a look at some of the aspects of the Holy Spirit’s being and work. Last week, you may recall, Rick Hill helped us understand something of the way the Holy Spirit is at work in our friendships, drawing on the story of Barnabas. This week, we’re going to take a brief look at the way in which we meet the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament – or, rather, one of the ways – and see if that helps us in our appreciation of his ministry in our lives, and in our appreciation of the work he does in the lives of others.

I suppose we tend to think of the Holy Spirit as very much a New Testament phenomenon. After all, we make a big thing of the way in which the Holy Spirit *first* came to the disciples at Pentecost, as if it was a completely new thing, something that was unheard of before that occasion. Well, of course, the events of Pentecost Sunday were unique and the Holy Spirit did, it seems, begin to work in the lives of God’s people in ways that had not, until then, been experienced. But the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, was not a totally unheard of aspect of God’s work among humanity. Indeed, Peter refers in his sermon to the prophecy of Joel, where God promises his Spirit will work powerfully in the lives of men and women of all ages (*Acts 2:17-21*, quoting *Joel 2:28-32*). And another prophet, Ezekiel, has a powerful vision of the Spirit of God reviving his people in *Ezekiel 37*. In some ways the situation is complicated by the fact that the Hebrew word which is translated as “Spirit” – *ru’ach* – can also be translated as “spirit”, “breath” and “wind”, so there’s an element of interpretation involved in the actual translation before you go any further.

This morning, though, I want to look at two or three instances of the work of the Holy Spirit where, in the version of the Bible which we are using, at least, the word is translated as “*Spirit*” (and has generally been so down through the centuries), and the Spirit in those examples is involved in a specific way. Let’s begin at the very beginning.

GENESIS 1

Right at the very beginning of the Bible, we encounter the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, involved in God’s creation of the world. The writer of this account of creation describes what was there before God got to work as “*formless and empty*” – or, as the old King James version has it, “*without form and void*”. [Just another bit of Hebrew, if you can stand it – the Hebrew phrase for that is gloriously onomatopoeic: *tohu wa bohu!*] But at this point we discover that the Holy Spirit is involved. He is “*hovering*” (or “*brooding*”) over the waters. For the Jewish people of the Old Testament era, the sea or “*the waters*” was a way of expressing chaos. The rolling seas and their frequent storms were, for them, an expression of a godless and orderless realm in which all kinds of nasty things happened.

And here is the Holy Spirit, right at the very beginning of time, of history, of the world as we know it, involved in the act of creation, bringing order and creativity to a chaotic and frightening situation. As the story unfolds, we read of God speaking to himself in the plural (v26, “*Let us ...*”). The Holy Spirit is part of the creative genius of God, bringing order and structure to what is formless and chaotic, bringing life and substance to what is empty and lifeless. This is the Holy Spirit of creativity.

Those words in *Genesis 1:26* refer to God making humanity “*in his own image*”, reflecting something of God’s own personality and character. So it follows that human beings are intended by God to be, amongst other things, creative. We share that aspect of God’s character. But, as you know, the ways in which the first human beings chose to rebel against God’s instructions to them had the consequence that God’s image, although still clearly present in them, was distorted and spoiled. What should have been obvious in all people became less apparent. So God has, from time to time, to re-infuse parts of his image into people, which he does by his Holy Spirit. And for some people the part of his image which he

specifically re-infuses them with by his Holy Spirit is that creativity. Let's fast forward to *2 Samuel* and the story of King David.

2 SAMUEL 23:2

In fact, this is a passage taken from towards the end of David's life. In the version of the Bible we're using, the section is actually headed "*The Last Words of David*", although there are still a few bits to come, even on into *1 Kings*. But as he sums up his life, David recognises that God has been at work in him by his Spirit. He seems to be saying that God has a final word for him to say, but if you ignore the way in which translators and scribes have punctuated and divided up this little section (which was not the case in the original Hebrew), you'll see that the sentence about God's Spirit speaking through him follows on immediately from his description of himself as "*Israel's singer of songs*".

Not only was David Israel's greatest king, but he was also a great musician, whose performances were able to calm King Saul's demonic moods. And he was undoubtedly also Israel's greatest poet and songwriter – in fact, he was one of the world's greatest poets. Sometimes the fact that the *Psalms* are part of the Bible, and we mine them for nuggets of spiritual direction, can prevent us appreciating that they are magnificent poems, an amazing work of literature. I reckon David's poems stand comparison on a literary and creative front with the greatest writings of any culture.

But those great examples of the poet's art were inspired and brought to fruition by the Holy Spirit working, speaking through David. The creativity of God was obvious in the expression of David's praises, laments and musings. Look back through history and you will come across innumerable examples of God's Holy Spirit at work in the creative processes of writers, poets and songsmiths. There's a great bit in C S Lewis's spiritual autobiography *Surprised By Joy* where he writes, "*All the books were beginning to turn against me*". This great literary scholar, this hugely important critic and writer had spent years looking at great poetry and classic writing, hoping to find in what he read something that would buttress his opposition to Christianity. The suddenly it dawned on him that all the really great writers and poets whom he had read and admired were Christians and their Christianity infused their work to the extent that Lewis was himself drawn to Christ. The Holy Spirit had inspired their writing and that was obvious to the reader. In a similar vein, the comedian Armando Iannucci was on the television a couple of weeks ago enthusiastically celebrating the story of humanity's creation, fall and redemption by God in Milton's great poem *Paradise Lost*. (The people who keep banging on about there being no religion or Christianity on television any more are clearly not looking in the right places!)

That same Holy Spirit continues to inspire men and women in their creativity. Yes, songwriters and lyricists whose work enhances our worship – but also poets and novelists and playwrights and singers and composers and musicians who don't necessarily write stuff that we sing and read in church, but whose commitment to God is just as apparent in their work. I read from Steve Turner at the beginning of the service. Some of you have heard Stewart Henderson's work on the radio or in our own Guildhall. There are plenty of others who are using their Holy Spirit-inspired creativity to say to a chaotic and, for many, frightening world that God is in charge, that there is hope, that there is an alternative to despair and dysfunction. And it's not just wordsmiths ...

EXODUS 31

Which brings us to the passage we read earlier. I've referred to these verses many times, but if you haven't ever heard that, it's easy to miss this wonderful section of God's words to his people through Moses. It's hidden away amongst all sorts of instructions about how to construct a tabernacle and how to appoint and dress priests. I suspect few of us venture into this little backwater of Holy Scripture unless forced into it by a daily reading plan, or a bizarrely enthusiastic preacher such as you see before you this morning.

God is telling Moses about the person he is to put in charge of the decoration of the Tabernacle, the kind of portable Temple the people of Israel are to use for worship while they're wandering about in the desert for forty years. If you ever take the time and trouble to read about the Tabernacle and manage to keep your mind off trying to work out the spiritual significance of all the furnishings and embellishments, you will notice that it was to be a richly ornamented and amazingly crafted bit of kit. And if you stop and ponder just how it was to be taken from God's drawing board to the solid reality that it became, then you will be aware that it was going to need some pretty skilled craftsmen. It's worth reading the passage we've read today alongside *Exodus 35:30ff*.

You will see that what was needed was a person who was skilled in sculpture, carving, embroidery, weaving, carpentry, metalwork and, on top of all that, training others to do the same. Step forward Bezalel, son of Uri and his assistant Oholiab, son of Ahisamach. These were real artists. And how had they come by such a gift? The language of *Exodus 31:3* is right out of the New Testament, it seems: they were "*filled with the Spirit*" – charismatic craftsmanship! Here, once again, was the Holy Spirit of God granting creativity to human beings. Here is there Holy Spirit re-infusing that creative characteristic of God's being into people made in his image.

Look back across history again, and notice those men and women who have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to create sublime works of art – sculpture, painting, tapestry, stained glass, woodwork, metalwork and so on. And we have people like that in this congregation. Just as not everyone has the spiritual gift of healing or of wisdom or of prophecy, so not everyone has the spiritual gift of artistry or craftsmanship. But without those people our community would be the weaker, our worship the poorer.

We may want to decry the ways in which older churches used to be full of statuary, their walls covered in religious paintings and the windows glazed with extravagant stained glass. But surely there is something life-affirming and worship enhancing when those who are gifted by God are able to contribute to the life of his people by using their charismatic craftsmanship. We have our worship enhanced by the gifts of our musicians and preachers, but it is also helped by the vision of the banner-makers, and the craftsmanship of decorators and woodcarvers – and it is sometimes further enhanced by dancers and actors. Let us not forget the creative gifts of the Holy Spirit as we worship and witness in this city.

Those of you who were at the recent Church Meeting will know that we are starting to think about re-decorating and re-furbishing this sanctuary area of these premises. It would be great if that, too, were to be seen as an opportunity to involve those amongst us who have been "*filled with the Holy Spirit of God with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts*". So let us both encourage one another in using and cultivating these gifts of the Holy Spirit and celebrate their use in our shared life together.

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Questions for discussion

1. In what way could the Holy Spirit be said to be creative in *Genesis 1*?
2. Can you think of any books or poems which you think have been inspired in some way by the Holy Spirit? What makes you say that? Share any examples of Christian writers that you might be aware of.
3. How can we use such things in our worship and our witness?
4. Why do you think people from our tradition have been so opposed to art used in church in the past? Do you agree with them?

5. How could we make use of the Spirit-filled artists in our church? How could we encourage them in what they do?