

“THE MYSTERY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT”
Mark 1:9-13; 1 Timothy 3:14-16; John 14:12-14

Well, just in case it has passed you by completely, this is the weekend of the Lichfield Mysteries. They happen here every three years and many of you will have had the opportunity to see them before, even if only yesterday. If you're not quite sure what the fuss is all about, this is reckoned to be the largest community theatre event in Europe and involves around 1,000 actors and countless other people (costume, musicians, lighting and sound people, directors and so on) in staging what is basically the story of the creation and redemption of humanity according to the Christian tradition. There are 27 plays based on the Old and New Testaments, and those plays are performed by different groups of people, both professional and amateur, on two stages in the city – one in the Market Square and one in the Cathedral.

The words are based on mediaeval plays, performed in the days before most people were able to read the Bible for themselves. Different Guilds in the city would take responsibility for each play and take them around the city for all the citizens to see. There are two (at least) explanations of why they were called “Mystery” plays. The first is that the word “mystery” at one stage meant a guild of tradesmen. More likely is the explanation that the plays were depicting the holy mysteries of the faith. (There are probably other possibilities, too, so yes, you probably are right.)

“*Mystery*” is a favourite word of St Paul. Of the nineteen uses of the word in the New Testament, fifteen of them occur in his letters. And Paul uses the word in a very particular way. It's not anything to do with what we've already said. Nor does it mean something that really is not clear to people, as we would talk of a crime mystery. The way he uses the word is to describe something that has hitherto been hidden but is now revealed. That's certainly the way he uses it in those few lines from the letter to his young pastor friend Timothy – “*The mystery of godliness is great*”. This is a wonderful secret, but now God has chosen to let you in on it, is basically what he is saying.

And the mystery is then set out in the form of a little credal hymn, a simple statement of belief that was, no doubt, used by the early Christians in their worship. If you were following in your Bibles, you'll notice that the last few lines of that passage are set out like a poem, or a chorus. This is one of those statements that is at the heart of our gospel: we believe that Jesus came into the world as a human being, made a difference to the world and then returned to his glory. In these few weeks following the festival of Pentecost, as we reflect on the person and activity of the Holy Spirit (probably still a mystery to many of us!), I just want to focus in on the second line of that little hymn – “*he was vindicated by the Spirit*” – and then use the other two bits we heard read to help understand it a bit more.

You see, Jesus was the revealed secret – the “*open secret*” as Cliff Richard once sang – at the heart of God's plan for the redemption of broken humanity. He (Jesus, not Cliff Richard) had been foretold by the Hebrew prophets in words that weren't always very clear to their listeners – and probably wouldn't be very clear to us today if we didn't have the benefit of hindsight – and then appeared on earth in curious circumstances as a baby. Despite the rumours of his birth to a virgin, he might not have achieved any prominence at all – and, indeed, was pretty well unknown for the first thirty or so years of his life – had it not been for what he was able to do with the help of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit vindicated him, enabled him to make his mark and demonstrated through him the truth of the Old Testament prophecies.

Matthew and Luke record in their accounts of Jesus' life the same episode that we read about in *Mark 1:9-13* just now. Jesus' ministry on earth is generally reckoned to have begun with this incident. He finds John the Baptist wandering about, preaching out in the countryside, and asks to be baptised himself. As he comes up from the water, each of the gospel writers describes the Holy Spirit being sent into Jesus' life, accompanied by the visual symbol of a dove. Jesus' ministry begins with the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Now he can begin to fulfil his destiny and get stuck in to the mission that he has been given by his Father.

That call is first tested by his temptations, which are recorded by Matthew Mark and Luke, and then it becomes clear that this is definitely a special person. His teaching begins to cause problems for the authorities and delight for the ordinary folk. He is identified as someone who speaks with authority. His words – parables, arguments, commands, questions, prophecies – are spoken with power and received with reverence by most people. He can speak with such authority that demons cower and storms are stilled.

And it's not just his words. He performs healings and exorcisms, demonstrates his power over the forces of nature, provides food for the hungry and hope for the hopeless, raises the dead and cleanses the Temple. Here is someone who is clearly empowered by something or someone beyond himself. And others recognise that. Some of the officials of the establishment put it down to demonic possession, but Jesus points out the major flaw in that argument as he casts demons out of others. Many come to him, confident that he can help them in ways that no-one else has been able to help them. And through it all we see Jesus offering his contemporaries glimpses of the Kingdom of God, little insights into the mysteries of God's will and flashes of what he renewed and redeemed world will be like.

Not many years afterwards, Paul is writing to his friend Timothy to give him some advice on how to run a church, basically. And he includes the words we read, which include the assertion that it was the Holy Spirit who made this possible. Having lived through the events of the Easter weekend, having watched as Jesus returned to heaven, having experienced the amazing phenomena of Pentecost, those first Christians can now see how it all hangs together. This Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, Son of Man and Son of God, was able to do all this because of the power of the Holy Spirit working through him. Jesus was infused with the Spirit of God. It was that which "*vindicated*" him, which proved he was who he said he was and who the Hebrew prophets said he would be.

That, of course, can be a help to us in our own belief – although there is a lot that is still pretty mysterious for most of us, I suspect. But in the words we read from John's gospel, it starts to become clear that we can participate in it too. In the last, long conversation that Jesus has with his followers, which takes up most of chapters 13 to 16, Jesus talks about his departure from them and about what the future could hold for them as they continue his mission on earth. Amongst other things, he promises them that they, too, can experience the power and presence of the Holy Spirit once he is gone.

But what is most amazing is that he tells them – and his followers down through the centuries – that if they really believe it, if they really want to, they can do what he has been doing. In fact, he says in *John 14:12* that they – we – will be able to do "*even greater things*". That seems astonishing to me, but here it is in the Bible. Of course, the first reaction of many people to such verses is to try and explain it away, to suggest that Jesus didn't really mean that. (Curiously, the people who seem most keen to suggest that Jesus didn't really mean it are the very ones who claim to be so biblically based in their faith – but we won't go into all that.) There is a school of thought that says that Jesus just meant that there would be far more people – his followers – to do stuff than he had been able to do as an individual person, even though he was divine.

I must admit, I don't see any reason to suggest that Jesus didn't actually mean what he said. It was the same Holy Spirit that had empowered Jesus that came to the first disciples at Pentecost. And as you read through the book of *Acts* you'll see that they managed to do some pretty amazing things whilst the Holy Spirit was at work within them. I have yet to be convinced that the Holy Spirit no longer works like that today. True, some people do make rather exaggerated claims about what they have experienced and accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit, but that shouldn't negate that fact that he is still at work in this world.

Those of you who were here last week may recall that we looked at what Paul had to say in *Romans 8* and discovered that the Holy Spirit is present in the lives of all those who take the decision to follow Jesus. So we are all pretty well kitted out to do what Jesus is talking about here. The Holy Spirit within us can enable us to do great things, things such as our co-heir of God's glory, Jesus, was able to do. Does that

surprise you? If you stop and think about it, it's not just surprising – it's utterly amazing. But here it is in the Bible – the Bible which we claim to believe and acknowledge as the authority for our Christian lives.

Some of you may remember the late John Wimber, an American preacher and evangelist who was credited with founding the “*Signs and Wonders*” movement. His thesis was that, through the Holy Spirit, God would authenticate the preaching of his word, so that, whenever the gospel was preached there would be supernatural signs, such as healings and exorcisms. I'm not sure I go along with everything he taught, but there's a sense in what we've read this morning that we are shown to be followers of Jesus by the way in which the Holy Spirit enables us to continue Jesus' ministry in the communities where he has placed us.

You and I can have our relationship with Jesus vindicated by the Holy Spirit. He is present within us and he can work through us to accomplish the things that God wants done. Jesus did some amazing things, and we can as well, if we are prepared to let the Holy Spirit work within us. Douglas was telling me of how that happened at one of the Alpha course evenings – almost in spite of Douglas's own hesitancy. If the work of Jesus is to continue on this earth, in this community, in this city, then it will do so through us, through men and women and young people who have listened to God's voice, acknowledged the Lordship of Jesus Christ and accepted that the Holy Spirit is within them, just waiting to be unleashed, if you like.

Just think what we could do for God in this place if we all lived like that, if we all wanted the Holy Spirit to work through – and believed that he would. Maybe the greatest mystery is that we don't really make use of the awesome power of the Holy Spirit as we try to live as Jesus' followers day by day.

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Questions for discussion

1. Do you find Christianity mysterious? In which ways? Is it right to preserve some of the mystery or should we be trying to explain it all? How can we bring a sense of mystery into our worship?
2. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus at his baptism, according to the Gospels. Did Jesus have the Holy Spirit at all before that? If he didn't, was he really divine?
3. What do you think Jesus was saying in *John 14:12*? Why do we not see many miracles and other supernatural demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's power today? Is it simply a matter of faith?
4. Would you like to be able to do "*greater things than these*"? Why/why not?
5. In what ways could we make ourselves more available and open to the Holy Spirit? What could we do as a church to encourage this?