

## **Sermon 19 May 2013 - "Paraclete"**

**Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT**

**Gregor Henderson**

**Acts 2:1-12, John 14:8-17**

There's several very good questions in today's Bible readings. One we didn't quite get to in our Acts reading about the day of Pentecost was the accusation from some bystanders "Aren't these men drunk?" Alongside that is the very good question from other passers-by "What does this mean?"

In our gospel reading Philip, evidently somewhat frustrated at not being able fully to understand Jesus, asks "Lord, can't you just show us the Father? Then we'll be satisfied!" And what does he receive in response? More questions, this time from Jesus – "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you do not know me? How can you say 'show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I'm in the Father and the Father in me?" Questions, lots of questions....

I think Philip's question, and his frustration, are eminently sensible. Among the most basic questions we all face sooner or later are questions about God. How do we know God? What's God like? Does God actually exist? In our gospel reading from John today, Jesus answers these questions in three ways.

First, he simply asserts the existence of God. It's a given. Jesus has no doubt. His relationship with God the Father is so close that he never questions God's existence, so close that he has been regarded as the Son of God by people of faith ever since his death and resurrection. God exists.

Second, we know God through knowing Jesus. "Whoever has seen me", says Jesus, "has seen the Father". If we want information as to the nature of God, then look no further than Jesus. So we learn that God is compassionate, self-giving, self-sacrificing, generous, forgiving, inclusive and persistent in loving and caring, wanting people to be whole, free, happy, wanting people to live unselfishly, peacefully, lovingly. We know God through knowing Jesus.

Third, Jesus speaks of the gift of the Holy Spirit. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." Here Jesus is responding to the unspoken question of "yes, we can know God through knowing you – but what happens when you depart, when you're no longer with us?"

The word translated "Advocate" is one of the many terms used for the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. It is notoriously hard to translate and understand. In the Greek it's "paraclete", and it is variously translated into English as advocate, helper, comforter, counsellor, friend, encourager. Its literal meaning is "called to be alongside", thus someone who is alongside us in a positive caring role. As advocate it carries the dual meaning of one who advocates on our behalf with God and one who advocates on God's behalf with us – a both-directions advocate, linking God and us.

Jesus then goes on to call this advocate the "Spirit of truth", one who bears witness to the truth of God and to the truth about how we are to live. Overall, Jesus is saying you know God through knowing me and through sensing the Spirit's presence in your life.

In a few minutes we're going to sing a 1200-year-old hymn about the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit – hymn 397. In verse 3 it intriguingly refers to the sevenfold graces of the Spirit. The church 1200 years ago found reference to six graces of the Holy Spirit in the writings of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 11 speaks of a descendant of king David who will emerge in the future with the Spirit of God resting on him, and in verse 2 it spells out six aspects of this gift of the Spirit – wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. In the book of Revelation the Holy Spirit doesn't rate a mention, but there is frequent reference to seven spirits in the presence of God, seven being the number of perfection, completeness, in the time of Revelation. So the medieval church took the six aspects of the Spirit and added a seventh – godliness – and regarded these as the sevenfold graces of the Holy Spirit.

What this says to us is that the Holy Spirit grants us wisdom, which means discernment and prudence; understanding, which means empathy and perceptiveness; counsel, which means advice and diplomacy; power or might, which means capability and perseverance; knowledge, which means learning and expertise; fear of the Lord, which means humility and trust in God; and godliness, which means prayerfulness and goodness.

It's also worth mentioning another list of seven. We've just completed seven weeks of Saturday morning meditation sessions which took as their theme the seven "cardinal virtues", a list developed by the medieval church. These virtues are prudence or wisdom, justice, temperance or self-discipline, courage, faith, hope and love – and they are seen also as generated, inspired by the Spirit.

But most importantly, one other thing – this time from the Acts reading and emphasised time and again in the rest of the New Testament. The Holy Spirit is gifted to all the followers of Christ. It's not just the closest followers of Jesus who receive the Spirit. It's all – men, women, children. The Holy Spirit is God with us, God offering his loving presence to each and every one of us, offering his gifts, his graces of wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge, fear of the Lord and godliness.

To conclude this week as I did last week. Remember the last words of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, as he lay dying in London in 1791 - "the best of all is, God is with us." On this day of Pentecost, some 1980 years after the extraordinary gifting of the Spirit on Jesus' followers in Jerusalem, God is still with us, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, still available to us. The best of all is, God is with us.

To the glory of God. Amen.