

Just what is the Spirit?

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6th Sunday of Easter: May 17

**Readings: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17, Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20,
1 Peter 3:15-18, John 14:15-21**

WITH astonishing rapidity, we are now drawing near to the end of the Easter season, and beginning to look forward to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

But what is this “Holy Spirit”? The New Testament knows all about it, but never quite tells us what it does. We have to squeeze the text for what it can say to us about the Spirit.

In the **first reading** for this Sunday, we watch the work of the Spirit as “Philip went down to the city of Samaria [that unlikely place] and was proclaiming the Messiah to them”. The results were spectacular: “Many people who had unclean spirits were coming out with a loud shout; and many paralysed and lame people were healed.” Then [and for Luke this is a sure sign of the Spirit]: “There was much joy in that city.”

But there is more to come, for the news reaches Headquarters in Jerusalem, so Peter and John are sent down as an official Commission of Enquiry. They “prayed over them that they might receive the Holy Spirit...then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit”.

We notice that Luke does not tell us what it is like when you get the Spirit; he is, however, absolutely certain that it had happened to these foreigners.

The **psalm** does not directly mention the Holy Spirit, of course, but we can deduce from its poetry some of the effects of that Spirit: “Sing a joyful song to God, all the earth, make music to the glory of his name.” Then the poet invites us: “Say to God, ‘How fearful your deeds; let all the earth bow down before You.’”

Then we are reminded (by the Spirit, of course) of what God did in the Good Old Days: “He changed the sea into dry land; they crossed the River on foot—let us rejoice in him.”

Then there is a proclamation from the singer (filled by the Spirit): “Come and hear what he did for my soul.” Finally, it ends in spirit-filled joy: “Blessed be God who did not refuse my prayer or deny me his steadfast love.”

In the **second reading**, likewise, continuing our journey through 1 Peter, the Spirit is not directly mentioned, but once more we can see what the Spirit does: “Keep

the Lord Christ holy in your hearts, always ready to make your defence for the one who asks you for an account of the hope that is in you.”

That ability to speak out is a gift of the Spirit, as is the way we are to do it: “with meekness and fear, with a clean conscience”. And we may also suffer: “It is better for us to suffer for doing good, if that is what God’s Will wants, than for doing evil.”

The point is that we have to recognise that “Christ suffered once for sinners, the Just One for the unjust, to bring you to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but restored to life in the Spirit”. That is what the Spirit does for us.

In the **Gospel** for this Sunday we are once more in the Upper Room, listening to Jesus’ discourse on the night before he dies. Here he is unmistakably speaking of the Spirit.

First, the familiar exhortation, “If you love me, then you will keep my commands.” Then he speaks of the Paraclete: “I am going to ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete, that he may be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.”

Jesus’ followers, on the other hand, do know him, because “he remains with you, and is in you”. Most precious of all is the firm assertion that God has not abandoned us (that is what the Spirit has done): “I am not going to leave you as orphans—I am coming to you.”

The gift of reminding us that we are part of the family is one of the qualities of the Spirit.

Then there is another, related quality, the gift of knowing the relationship of Jesus and his Father: “On that day, you will know that I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you.” That is something that only the Spirit can give.

And this section of the Gospel concludes: “The one who has my commandments and keeps them, that is the one who loves me. Now the one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love that person and show myself to that person.”

So there you have the Spirit, at work in the lives of each of us, in a very intimate and unmistakable way.

During this week, you could do a great deal worse than to examine what you understand by the Spirit, and how the Spirit is and has always been at work in your life.