

The Holy Spirit—Unity, Worship, Mission

A Sermon for St Paul's Anglican, Boronia and the Basin.

27th July 2008

Please take your pew Bibles and turn to the verse that says “God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.”

Anyone know where it is?

Anyone know why this is a trick question?

Well, the answer is that it's not in the Bible at all. Anyone know *where* you will find the phrase “God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform”?

Yes the answer is—in the hymn book. Number 516 in The Book of Common Praise.

And I will be the first to admit, that in preparing for today's message, I tried to look it up in the Bible first. Failing that, I googled it and found the hymn, written by William Cowper.

William Cowper was a great hymn writer of the 18th century. Six of his hymns appear in the Book of Common Prayer, and four survived to make it into the 1977 Australian Hymn Book. Although none, that I can tell, are sung at Hillsong these days.

Which may be a pity, because William Cowper knew a thing or two about the mysterious ways of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, our topic again today is the Holy Spirit. And today we have three topics in one. A Triple-Header sermon. One sermon playing out on three screens right here in your neighbourhood.

Ken has given me the topic, or should I say *topics*, of “The Holy Spirit – Unity, Worship, Mission.” I am sure any preacher worth his or her salt could preach up a storm on any one of these subjects.

How does the Holy Spirit create Unity in the church?

What is the Holy Spirit's role in the Worship of the church?

What is the Holy Spirit doing in the Mission of God in the world?

Indeed, I have heard of preachers who decided to preach for a whole year on just one of these topics. Not continuously. Not preaching 24/7, but for a half hour each Sunday for 52 weeks. I have heard of such a thing. Although, praise God, I never had to endure sitting in the pews through such a feat of oratory.

Anyway, back to today's monumental assignment.

What to say, in a few minutes on “The Holy Spirit – Unity, Worship and Mission”?

Well, to cut to the chase, I think the most important thing to say is that the Holy Spirit is a mystery. Which is why I quoted William Cowper.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.

If the PPA, the Professional Preachers' Association, will permit me, I'd like to use those two lines of a hymn as my text today.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.

If you will take your pew bibles now, and turn to our first reading. It's on page 1081 and is Ephesians 4 verse 3.

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit, through the bond of peace."

Just look at the verses around this. Paul starts this section by challenging us to live lives worthy of our calling.

And following the verse we read this morning, what is he writing about? One body. One Spirit. The things we have in common in the church ought to bind us together.

And, perhaps a little surprisingly, the Holy Spirit does this for us in the church. The Holy Spirit works within the church to create unity despite the enormous diversity.

There's a lot of talk about divisions in the church. There's all this talk about an Anglican split. Some people going to the Lambeth conference. Some other people, including a few from Sydney, going to some definitely-not-Lambeth conference in Jerusalem.

There's all this talk about different ways of worshipping, different attitudes to social issues, different opinions about what is important and what is not.

Division, differences, splits.

Yet, somehow the Body of Christ survives. Somehow, mysteriously, the church keeps on keeping on. Not just the Anglican version of the church, but the whole Body of Christ.

Despite all the things that could divide, somehow Unity continues under one Lord, one Spirit. How? It's a mystery.

About 10 years ago, I visited Banja Luka in Bosnia. Banja Luka, by the way, is the home town of someone who worships in this church. If you don't know who that is, ask around.

In Banja Luka I visited a series of Catholic churches that had been destroyed in the fighting. One might say, rather too simplistically, that Orthodox Christians were destroying Catholic Christian churches.

I was shown around by a bright, happy, funny priest. He took us into the main Catholic church in Banja Luka which, mercifully, had escaped much of the damage. I noticed some holes in the stain-glassed windows high up in the roof. When I pointed them out he said, "Ah yes, ecumenical shots."

You see, even though the people of God were fighting one another, literally fighting, the Holy Spirit could maintain a spirit of ecumenism, a spirit of Christian community. Even the shells that came through the roof of his church were "ecumenical shots"—an expression of the Body of Christ.

It's a mystery. But it's a mystery that has its mysterious source with God.

You see God is a community. One of the more mysterious aspects of God is that He is a Trinity. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three in One.

There is something here that is more than mere human minds can get. But surely we can observe that Unity and Community are not merely important. They express the essence of God. And we, made in the very image of God, are people who need to live in community. In Unity.

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.

Our second verse today is found on Page 1086. It's from Philippians 3 verse 3.

The middle part of the verse says "we who serve God by his Spirit."

Now I have to explain something. In almost every other translation of the Bible, apart from the one you have in our hands, the Greek word that is translated here as "serve" is translated differently. It's usually translated as "worship"—so the verse reads "we who worship by the Spirit of God."

Now, since you are all good Bible scholars you will know that in the original Greek, the ideas of "serve" and "worship" are interchangeable. To worship God is to serve God. We are God's servants. And when we come to Church, we come to worship him. We come to serve him. Indeed, we don't come to a worship program, or a worship workshop, we come to a worship SERVICE.

So this verse is talking about serving God, and it's also talking about worshiping God. The ideas are the same.

So how does the Holy Spirit help us to worship or serve God?

Well, if you look around this verse you see that Paul is saying that outward signs are not how we worship. Rituals are not the essentials. Qualifications are not required.

What is required is that we Worship by the Spirit of God.

Now, Paul is not saying that rituals and qualifications are without merit. After all, he rather cleverly I think, goes on to talk about his own meritorious qualifications.

You know, rituals in the church can be useful. Following an order can help. Playing the chords right in the songs, can be a benefit to worship. If Judy and I decide to play different hymns at the same time, and you guys all sing whatever you feel like, I think we might be creating something of an obstacle to the Spirit of God in worship.

But as one of our modern hymns says, "I'll bring you more than a song, for a song in itself, is not what you have required."

That song, we know it as "The Heart of Worship" goes like this

"When the music fades,

"all is stripped away,

"And I simply come,

"Longing just to bring something that's of worth

"That will bless your heart.

“I’ll bring you more than a song,
“for a song in itself,
“is not what you have required.”

I mentioned the hymn-writer, William Cowper, before. He wrote another hymn which survives today in some places. It starts like this:

“Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings.”

I think that’s a good way to describe how the Holy Spirit works in worship. He works to surprise us while we sing. Or while we pray. Or while we listen to a preacher.

One of the surprising thing you discover when you begin this business of preaching, is what people hear. It’s not always what you think you said. And quite often, it’s a lot better than what you said.

A preacher sits down to prepare the sermon. Well, actually in my case, I don’t sit down until the Saturday before the Sunday. And that’s deliberate. Because I have found that too much preparation, too soon, makes Philip’s talks a dull ordeal. I can write a sermon pretty easily really. It’s nice to be able to say that, but too much ability can get in the way of the Holy Spirit. So I start thinking about the topic I am given *WEEKS* before I start writing anything down.

And during those weeks, I can hear the Holy Spirit suggesting things to me. It’s the writer’s Refining Fire. In the last few days a kind of shape emerges. I remember some stories I want to tell (like the one about “ecumenical shots”) and then when I finally sit down and fire up Microsoft Word, it just sort of comes together.

It always feels like a mystery to me.

But then, as I say, when I preach it, the Holy Spirit lets you guys hear it in your own way. Or perhaps, one should say, your hear it in HIS own way. In the way the Holy Spirit wants you to hear it.

Someone will come up to me afterwards and say they really appreciated what I said about such and such, and sometimes I am left standing there thinking, “Did I say that?”

Oh well, praise God for whatever the Holy Spirit works in your hearts today.

Let’s just make sure we make space for the Holy Spirit in our worship. I don’t mean that we should leave everything to chance. But it is possible to so regulate our worship that we put barriers up to the Holy Spirit’s work.

I remember a conference I was responsible for organising in the Philippines about 15 years ago. Actually, I told you this story before. Because I keep good records, I know I told you on 21st May 2006, but since I had to look it up and check that I told you before, I think you’ve probably forgotten that I told you before, so I might get away with telling you again.

I remember organising an introductory worship service for an international conference in the Philippines. It took weeks of organising and a whole day of rehearsals. It went off without a hitch. A major production success. Afterwards, I was talking to a lovely Swiss priest who specialised in meditation and reflection. I asked him how he thought it went.

He knew I was pleased with what we had done. He said, “Very tight, I’d say. No room for the Holy Spirit at all.”

This last week has seen a great celebration of Christians in Sydney with the visit of the Pope for World Youth Day.

The Pope asked the thousands of young people gathered at Randwick a question:

“What will you leave to the next generation? Are you building your lives on firm foundations? Building something that will endure? Are you living your lives in ways that opens up space for the Spirit, in the midst of a world that wants to forget God, or even rejects Him in the name of a false concept of Freedom. Are you using the gifts you have been given? Using the Power that the Holy Spirit is, even now, ready to release within you?”

This was the Pope’s challenge. “Are you living your lives in ways that *opens up space* for the Spirit.”

With these words, the Pope would be at home in any Charismatic church. But, you see, the Holy Spirit is at home everywhere in the church. At home in creating Unity, and at home in empowering Worship.

And, to come to our third reading, the Holy Spirit makes his home in Mission. Turn to page 1003 and Acts 1 verse 8.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus makes a direct connection between the Power of the Holy Spirit, and the job of bearing witness to the Faith.

Mark you, he doesn’t say that this is the only way that the power of the Holy Spirit will be shown in the world, but it is one of the most important.

The Holy Spirit empowers Mission.

This speaks to the nature of God. And his purpose or mission in the world. God is a saving God. The theologians describe this as the soteriological nature of God. Which is just a fancy Greek way of saying God DELIVERS us from sin, or that he is a SAVING God.

There’s too much to say here about the Holy Spirit and Mission. In August 1993, I spent 6 weeks on a sabbatical in England during which I studied the topic of mission and I wrote up my findings in a document that runs to 21 pages in 9 point font.

So, I just want to mention one aspect of how the Holy Spirit empowers us, you and me, for mission. As I said, it is in the nature of God to be a saving God. One way the Holy Spirit expresses God’s saving nature is to make more of us than we bring.

The Holy Spirit takes our giftedness, and makes something more of it. And there is a wonderful flip-side to this as well.

The Holy Spirit can make something of us despite our un-giftedness. He can work in ways that OVERCOME our own deficiencies. The Bible says, In our weakness, He is strong.

I mean, the Holy Spirit is not so powerless. If we *were* to all sing our own songs during a hymn break, it is entirely possible that the Holy Spirit could turn that experience into something powerful.

I remember being in a group in which everyone recited the Lord's Prayer in their own language. I can tell you that was a pretty powerful experience. So much so, that half way into the Lord's Prayer I forgot how it goes in English.

Back in 1993, after we had spent some time with me locked up in a library in Selly Oak, Birmingham, Judy, Richard and I toured up into Scotland. I was keen to visit the home of David Livingstone.

That home is in an old Mill building in Blantyre, not far from Glasgow. The National Trust has converted the mill into the David Livingstone Museum.

I wanted to go there because I had just read a very interesting biography of this great missionary. David Livingstone is famous for having travelled as a missionary to Africa in the 1800s and becoming even more famous as an explorer. He is said to have discovered the Victoria Falls, which no doubt surprised the locals who had been living around there forever.

Livingstone was a medical missionary. He served the people as a doctor and shared with them his Christian faith. There is little doubt that he was used by God for much good.

But Livingstone was hardly a perfect person. Indeed, the biography I had read analysed his history and made the case that, in fact, David Livingstone was a manic depressive. He suffered a bipolar disorder.

His life was punctuated by extremes of frantic activity and depths of black depression. His writings reveal hatred towards his superiors and a strong sense that he was always under attack by those in authority, or those whom he perceived to have authority over him.

He may have achieved much, but his family suffered for it. His children grew up fatherless. His wife tried to follow him in Africa and contracted malaria and died.

Livingstone's story is like many who have been used by God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do great things for the Mission of God in the World, despite the flaws and failings.

Do you ever wonder how God can use you? Well, the truth is that God can use just anything.

World Vision was started by a man in the Livingstone mould. Maybe not bipolar, but certainly flawed. He abandoned his family, one of his daughters finally committing suicide. He was a hopeless manager, almost running World Vision into bankruptcy in the 1960s. He had an ego the size of Western Australia, and a demanding leadership style that bordered on cruelty.

Yet, the Holy Spirit used this man, Bob Pierce, to create an amazing ministry of mission.

The Holy Spirit can use just anything. That doesn't mean we should give him just anything to use, but it does mean that we should not worry about our lack of ability, or even the things we see as our disabilities.

We should, as the Pope says, “live our lives in ways that opens up space for the Spirit.”

And really, it is up to us. Up to you and me whether this happens. Up to you and me whether the Holy Spirit works in our lives or not.

The question is not whether the Holy Spirit is ready, the question is whether we are ready.

The Holy Spirit says “Behold I stand at the door and knock.”

We only have to hear his voice, and open the door.

A-men.