

## SERMON 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021

*Genesis 1: 1 – 5, Mark 1: 4 - 11*

Here is a day in your life: you woke up in the morning, ate breakfast, listened to the radio, went to church, came home, sat by the fire with family, ate lunch, watched some T.V., went for a short walk, ate some supper, watched some more T.V., and then went to bed.

Can you imagine that? I guess you know it is a Sunday that I am describing, because you went to church. Otherwise, it might sound like any other unremarkable day, fairly accurately represented.

But, if I told you that I had just described Christmas Day, you might reflect that my description was somewhat lacking. After all, on Christmas Day perhaps you don't just eat breakfast and lunch, you prepare something special and traditional. You don't just go to church, you sing carols, wish others a Merry Christmas, and drink hot chocolate if it's St. Ninian's. You don't just come home and sit by the fire with whoever is around, you open presents with family in a broader sense. You don't just watch T. V.; you listen to the Queen's speech or Christmas 'Specials' and films.

There is a sense in which every day is the same, but special days are special when the things we do every day are transformed. I'm sure you eat an evening meal every day. But, it is a bit sad when that evening meal is the same as every evening meal on your birthday. On your birthday it needs to be transformed by a spirit of celebration.

That was the problem this year with Christmas, the pandemic sucked the spirit out of Christmas. It isn't enough to replicate the material aspects of Christmas as best you can – the food, the family, the TV, the gifts, to truly transform any old unremarkable day into Christmas Day, the day needs something of what we might call the Christmas Spirit.

The Christmas Spirit that transforms any old unremarkable day into Christmas Day is something abstract and intangible: it's a smell perhaps – of the Christmas tree, or a memory perhaps – of childhood Christmases, or a sound perhaps – of carols, or a sight perhaps – of the Queen, or a feeling perhaps – of irritation, of disappointment or joy, or happiness, it is the touch of something – those walnuts still in their shells. It is things you do and make. It is all of these things.

That is what we mean when we talk about the spirit of Christmas. It is that thing, or those things, that transform another unremarkable ordinary day into something special. This year, the Christmas spirit was harder to find, so Christmas didn't feel quite the same, the day wasn't transformed in quite the same way as it usually is.

What is true of Christmas Day is true of the Christmas story. Despite having a clear idea of what the spirit of Christmas is, people so often get hung up on the material nature of the traditional Christmas story. For example, in the story we hear that Mary, who is betrothed to Joseph, is going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, we immediately start asking biological, material, every day sort of questions: how did Mary get pregnant, who was the father, what role does Joseph play? Instead, we should notice that the story is about a woman having a baby, - another child in the world, something unremarkable and ordinary - and that this child will be transformed by a holiness of spirit, the Holy Spirit. That's the important point of the story.

And, as we saw with the spirit of Christmas, that it could transform another unremarkable ordinary day, this spirit of holiness will transform this other unremarkable ordinary baby.

In all the Gospels that Holy Spirit, which is predicted to transform the life of this baby, arrives when the baby reaches adulthood, when Jesus encounters John the Baptist. In all the Gospels this spirit comes from God.

Not only is this spirit capable of transforming this human being, but what's more, so transformed, Jesus will be able to affect similar transformations in others. In the Gospel of Mark, which we read this morning, we hear that John the Baptist baptised with water, something necessary for material existence, but Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit, something altogether more transformational than a glass of water. John is preparing people for change, Jesus will transform your ordinary, everyday life.

This idea that Jesus, Christianity, religion, the Bible is actually all about transformation and change and newness of life is right there at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis chapter one, which we also read. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep until a wind from God, the spirit of God, began a process of transformation that brought order out of chaos, light out of darkness, life out of formlessness.

In a couple of weeks, we will read from the Gospel of Mark of Jesus' first miracle. He will cure a man who is described as having an unclean spirit. Jesus, filled with the spirit of God, will transform someone filled with a spirit of anger and violence.

The Spirit of transformation is active elsewhere too. Famously, the Holy Spirit transforms the lives of the disciples after the crucifixion at Pentecost. There they were fearful and doubting, having locked themselves in a room, before the spirit of holiness transformed their lives.

In the New Testament epistle Second Timothy at chapter three and verse 16, we read the only verse which mentions that Scripture itself is inspired by God; inspired or animated or spirit filled. It doesn't mean, as so many have thought, that God wrote the Bible and dropped it down from on high. It means that these human books, written by people, are transformed for us by a spirit of holiness.

So, what is this Holy Spirit – this spirit of holiness – that transformed Jesus' life, the lives of the disciples, the words of the Bible, and the universe itself?

Well, just as we know roughly what makes up the spirit of Christmas that transforms any other unremarkable ordinary day – the smell of a particular tree, the taste of a particular cake, the sound of a particular hymn, the memory of a particular winter, a particular feeling, or the particular actions of decorating and buying and cooking – so we know too what makes up the spirit of holiness that transforms any other unremarkable ordinary life.

The Holy Spirit that transforms our lives is made up of those abstract, immaterial, intangible things that are holy; things that are life-giving. Just as the spirit of God hovering over the waters brought order out of chaos, light out of darkness, life out of formlessness, so the Holy Spirit is present when life-giving actions transform our lives, the world and the lives of others. Transformation happens when you have a relationship with yourself, other people and the universe around you that is holy, that is life-giving, that is: just, merciful, forgiving, loving, kind, generous, hopeful, joyful, peaceful.

At the beginning of 2021, what is the spirit that at the moment fills your life? Perhaps, as we begin another period of lockdown you are filled with a spirit of disappointment, depression – the Moderator of the General Assembly used a good Scottish word to describe the spirit that filled his soul when the Government announced the lockdown this week, he said he was scunnered. Perhaps, you too are filled with a scunnered spirit.

Over the course of this coming year what will heal you of this scunnered spirit, what will transform your life? The vaccine surely will; well, it will in a material, biological sense – and that's a start. If you are a God who is going to create a world you need some material stuff to start off with. If you are going to celebrate Christmas day, you need the material substance to form it from – lunch, song, tree. If you are someone who wants to meet God then you need the material substance to work with, the Bible, the church building, the congregation.

But, these are just the beginnings, the material substance to work with. They still need to be transformed. The material world needs the breath of God to form life. The day needs the spirit of Christmas to become special. The Bible needs to be respected and revered to become Holy Scripture. You need to do more than just turn up to church on a Sunday to be a Christian.

Yes, in 2021 the vaccine will change our lives – just like the water of the Jordan administered by John the Baptist changed the lives of the people of Judea - but the vaccine alone won't transform our lives, or our mood, or the world around us; the vaccine won't solve climate change for example, or poverty, or warfare, or a lack of fresh water for over 700 million people – it's just the material substance that we have to work with.

What will truly transform your mood, the lives of others and the world around us in 2021 is the spirit of holiness that animates your life, that breathes through it, that has the power to fill it with peace and hope and love and justice and generosity and kindness and forgiveness.

'I have baptised you with water,' said John, 'but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1: 8