

The Renewing of the Holy Spirit

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

*And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The Grandeur of God, Gerard Manley Hopkins

Maybe you recognised that; Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, *The Grandeur of God*. This poet was a priest in Britain during the industrial revolution. He saw the lovely green landscape of England gradually being filled up with dark ugly factories and steel mills. He suffered from depression too, and was often regarded as gloomy and withdrawn by others. You can hear some of this in his poems. But more than this too.

His poems also have a note of joy, of light, of praise to God. In this poem I read just a moment ago, for example, after he talks about how dark and dirty the world is, he says at the end *the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm heart and ah! Bright wings*. Despite the mess we human beings make in our world, and in our own lives, God's Spirit still somehow brings refreshing, renewing light and life, a new beginnings.

Well thousands of years before this poet wrote about the Holy Spirit's renewing work in the world, another was writing about the same topic: the Psalmist, here in psalm 104, which we heard so beautifully sung for us a few moments ago.

This poet, the psalmist, talks about how every living creature on earth, great and small is dependent on God, from the small creepy crawlies that move along the ocean floor to ships that sail on the surface, to the huge sea monsters. All earth's creatures – including us - grow, live, eat and drink when God opens his hand and provides for them and when God wills, they die. He takes away their breath, just as he gave it. It calls to mind the creation account

in Genesis 2 – how God formed the man (Adam) out of the dust and then breathed into him his own breath, his own Spirit, at which point that pile of dirt that God had bunched together became a living creature. It is God who gave his own breath, his Spirit to us human beings, and, the psalmist poignantly reminds us, it is he who takes away this breath from us too.

As one of the mum's said at our Bible Study on Thursday, what the psalmist is talking about here is the circle, or if you prefer, the cycle of life and death that comes with the times and seasons in our world that we have as a result of sin and death entering creation when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, just one chapter after God so lovingly created them. The wheel turns: living things are born, they live, they decline, they die. Our breath is taken and we return to the ground. As we are reminded on Ash Wednesday, dust we are and to dust we will return.

But there is more than just that going on here in this psalm, much more. As always in the Old Testament, as we read carefully we find the seeds of the New Testament. We see the promise of not just the renewal of the next season or the next generation of creatures who will live and then die, but of a far greater *renewal*, a recreation, a complete new beginning of life as God the creator first made it.

Enter the Holy Spirit, in verse 30. Let me read it: *When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.* This is the key verse in this whole reading, and it is why this psalm has traditionally been the psalm that is used to praise God at Pentecost.

This verse, set here in this psalm as it is, shows us a lot about the work of the Holy Spirit, about the way God's Spirit works, has always worked powerfully, yet gently and quietly, in the world and in our lives.

He was there at creation, as the psalmist says here in verse 30: *You send forth your Spirit and they are created.* Going back to Genesis again for a moment, you might remember the Spirit is mentioned, right at the beginning of everything, in Gen 1:2. Before God had even started creating the world, when everything was still formless and void, *God's Spirit brooded over the face of the waters* – this is the image Hopkins uses at the end of his poem! Yes, right back there the Holy Spirit was sent forth by the Father in his work of creation. And the Spirit is still doing his creating work today, send forth by the Father, bringing his life-renewing power to our world, and in our environment. He gives breath to all living creatures, and in fact to all living things. He is the one who, as we celebrate at harvest thanksgiving, brings the food forth from the ground, makes creation fruitful, opening his hand and filling us with good things, through the work of the farmers and food producers.

The psalmist says here, the Spirit renews the face of the ground – the word he uses here, in the original text, is very important and in some ways quite unexpected. He says that the Spirit, sent forth from God the Father, renews the face of the soil, the dirt, the dust – in Hebrew, *Adamah*.

He is talking about the fruitful soil from which our food comes of course, but there is something else, something even more significant there; the psalmist is using this word, *Adamah* (dirt, soil, clay) because back in Genesis 2, where God makes Adam (the man), he *forms him from the Adamah*, the dirt, then breathes his own breath, his own Spirit into his nostrils.

It is God's Holy Spirit who gave Adam, that pile of dirt, life. But not just him, that *first* Adam. God's living Spirit also came and breathed life into another dead body – a body that lay in a tomb for three days, the body of the one Paul called the *second* Adam, the body of Jesus. In Romans 8:11, St Paul throws bright light back onto this psalm, and shows us the ancient, marvellous and mysterious creating and recreating work of the Spirit, not just in creation but in the salvation of all us creatures of dust. He says there: *If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.*

Where the psalmist draws the outline, Paul here fills in the whole picture. The Holy Spirit who was there at creation, and is still sustaining and renewing our whole world, was there at the resurrection, creating life again, raising Jesus from death, and not only Jesus, Paul says, but us too. That same powerful, life-creating Spirit lives in you and me. The warm breast and bright wings that brooded over the waters at creation, brood over us too, enlightening us, enlivening our very mortal flesh and blood, our bodies that were formed from the dust, but are now destined for eternal glory.

Today, on Pentecost day, we celebrate how God fulfilled these words in Psalm 104:30 yet again, when the Holy Spirit renewed and gave life and breath to the new-born church, through the preaching of the Gospel to people of many different languages, and through the baptism of 3000 new souls, new 'Adams and Eves' who were raised with Christ by the power of the Spirit, just as we all were at the font, just as we are everyday.

We say in the creed: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. Not just life in general, but your life, my life; not just this earthly struggle we call life, but eternal, glorious heavenly life. And no matter where we go and what happens to us in this world, or how we are smeared and smudged by it, *The Holy Ghost over this bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*