

Pentecost 2022

Acts 2:1-21 John 14:8-17

Imagine for a moment that you find yourself in conversation with an alien from outer space who's trying to find out about life on earth. You and the alien have been talking. You've done pretty well so far. You've explained different models of society, and the alien, let's call him Sandy, seems to have got the idea. You've explained about government and democracy and Sandy can see what you mean. You've explained the broad outlines of human history and geography and Sandy seems to have got the idea. You even explain about the Eurovision song contest and Sandy seems to understand.

And then Sandy asks you a question. 'I come from a dry planet', says Sandy, 'it's covered in rocks and dust, and sand, which is how I got my name. So one thing I really don't understand is: what is this thing called 'water'? We don't have water on my planet, yet I keep hearing about it on earth. So what, on earth, is it?'

You try to explain, but it's not easy:

'What colour is it?' asks Sandy.

Erm, well its transparent, you can see through it. Sometimes it looks blue. Sometimes it looks grey or green. It all depends really.

'What does it taste like?' asks Sandy.

Erm, well it's tasteless.

'What is it like to touch, then? Is it solid like you, or is it a gas?'

Erm, no, it's a liquid.

'What's a liquid?'

Erm, well it's not a solid or a gas.

'That isn't very helpful.'

I'm sorry, Sandy, I'm doing my best!

'Well, does water have a shape?'

Erm, well it sort of takes the shape of things it's in, like a bowl or a river or a sea?

'What's a river?'

Oh don't go there!

'Ok, well, what does water feel like?'

Well, water feels wet.

'What is "wet?" Is that the same as "hot"?'

Erm no, but water can be hot.

'Cold then?'

Erm, no, but water can be cold.

Sandy takes the alien equivalent of a deep breath. 'Ok then' he says, 'you can't really tell me what water looks like, you can't really tell me what water tastes like, and you can't really tell me what water feels like. Is there anything you can actually tell me about this water? Why is it such a big deal?'

Well, you say, all life on earth needs water. Without water, earth would be a barren empty rock. Everything that you've seen on earth, all of it, is down to water. All life on earth needs water to live.

Sandy the alien is totally baffled: 'how can something that I can't see or taste or touch be so important for you?'

There's only one thing left for you to do. 'Come on', you say, 'we're going to the river'.

I apologise for the clumsy illustration, but just as it might be hard to explain the concept of 'water' to an alien who has no concept of liquids, so talking about the Holy Spirit challenges the limits of our language.

How can we, as creatures of space and time, talk knowledgeably about the Spirit of God who is beyond and upholds both space and time?

How can we, as physical creatures, talk meaningfully about the God who is beyond our physicality?

In claiming some sort of connection with the spirit of God, aren't we guilty of massive presumption or misguided philosophy?

In short, isn't seeking to understand the Holy Spirit an even harder task than explaining water to Sandy the alien?

Fortunately for us, while the gulf between God and ourselves is greater than all of space, one of the foundational truths of God is that God is love and love always reaches out to communicate. In other words, we can know about God, because God longs for us to know him and God helps us to know him.

And so one of the great tasks of the Holy Spirit is to help us to know God better. 'When the Advocate comes, Jesus says, 'whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth'.

So when we talk about the Holy Spirit, we are not as helpless as we might think. God's word to us in the bible provides us with narratives, stories and images of the Holy Spirit's work. And as we spend time with them, so we become more open to the Spirit's work in us and through us.

Many such images are familiar to us. The dove, the wind, the tongues of flame, all speak of different aspects of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit, love joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and the rest give us some clear signs of the Spirit's presence. The gifts of the Spirit, service, healing, teaching, giving, speaking in tongues and so on, show us how God can work in and through us in ways that are more than simply natural.

Likewise the stories of the Spirit's work in the bible show us how God cares for and governs his creation and his special creation, the people of God, us. The Spirit hovers over the waters of chaos before creation is created. The

Spirit affirms and empowers Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit, as we have heard, fills and empowers the disciples at Pentecost for their mission to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So my illustration of Sandy the alien is not in fact a very good one. When we talk about the Holy Spirit, we are not talking about someone unknowable. In talking about the Spirit, we are talking about the God who makes himself known to us in love. The gifts, the fruit, the power of the Holy Spirit is made known to us and is given to us.

But the Holy Spirit comes for a reason. We know that we live in a world that by and large does not yet choose, or is not yet able, to recognise and accept God's love. So many people have no concept of God and no knowledge of Jesus, in the same way that Sandy had no concept of water. All too often, sharing our faith and living the life God calls us to can feel alienating. We can even feel like aliens in our own world.

It's this context that Jesus' words in our gospel reading this morning speak into so powerfully. In promising the Holy Spirit to the disciples, Jesus calls the Spirit the 'advocate,' the 'Spirit of Truth.' The word translated 'advocate' here is *parakletos* in the Greek, and the Holy Spirit is often called the 'Paraclete' to this day. 'Paraclete' has a wide range of meanings: someone who encourages, who comforts, who helps, who makes appeals on somebody's behalf. All those meanings and more in Jesus words.

In promising the coming of the paraclete, Jesus knew that his followers would always face incomprehension, often opposition, sometimes persecution, and on occasion suffering and death. By and large, the world's way is not Christ's way, and if we follow Christ, there will be uncomfortable times when our lives don't fit the world's mould. In the face of the world's opposition and incomprehension the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, is God's gift to the church.

When we feel that we are being put on trial, in the face of the world's scorn, the Holy Spirit is our advocate, bearing witness to the truth that we live by, empowering Christian communities to live lives of undefended love that challenges the world's categories of winners and losers. In the face of the world's rejection of God, the Holy Spirit is our advocate, strengthening Christians to bear witness to the Truth we have come to know in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Holy Spirit turns the trial scene on its head. Not only does the Holy Spirit advocate in the Christian community's defence, the Holy Spirit holds the world accountable to God. As Jesus promises: 'when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement'. The presence of the Holy Spirit with the disciples acts as the guarantee of God's promises and the truth of Christ's resurrection. The Holy Spirit shows the world that because of Jesus Christ it can no longer be business as usual. In the face of the world's denial, the Spirit's presence guarantees Jesus Christ as Risen Saviour and as coming Judge. All of us are accountable, and at the same time all of us can be saved.

I think this raises questions for us. To return to Sandy the alien: we saw how hard it was to talk about water to somebody who had no concept of water. In the end, language can only take us so far. Once Sandy experiences water for himself, he will be able to see how it can have no colour and be blue, he'll be able to see how it takes any shape, he'll be able to taste its lack of taste, and he'll be able to know, for the first time, what 'wet' feels like.

In the same way, we can study scripture, or read books or listen to talks, but in the end, we come to be aware, to know, the Holy Spirit as we dare to put our trust in God, to open ourselves to the Spirit, and to ask for the gifts of the Spirit. This does not have to be wacky or dramatic or weird. This is about praying to God, asking the Holy Spirit to fill us and work through us. It's not

magic, it's prayer. It's asking God for more of God in your life and living in God's ways of love day by day.

It's seeing examples of this kind of love, from within and outside the church, that have been encouraging for me recently in the middle of so much anxiety about the state of the world. Seeing people caring for and helping our Ukrainian guests and seeing them able to feel safe and to find work has been wonderful. All around us there will be countless other examples of God's Spirit at work. It's my prayer for all of us this Pentecost that we might live in the power of the Holy Spirit, that we know the blessing of the presence of God, and also that we live in such a way that we are a blessing to our families, friends, and neighbours and to any strangers, and indeed, any aliens, among us.

As our Ukrainian brothers and sisters might say:

Slava Isusu Khrystos! Glory to Jesus Christ!

Slava Na viky! Glory forever!

-Phil