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God is spirit and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24)

Until recent times the Holy Spirit was, I suspect, a largely meaningless ending to the familiar jingle Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian people had some idea of what they meant when they spoke about God the Father or God the Son, but they seldom if ever spoke about God the Spirit for the very good reason that they had nothing to say about – Him - weren't indeed sure whether it was a Him or an it.

That situation is changing now due to a combination of rather different developments. Theologians are becoming increasingly nervous about personifying the eternal God in purely human terms, whether as Father or as Son. Of course those descriptions have always been properly seen as analogies meaning that God the creator can be best understood in terms of the creation of human life and human parenthood; and that the relationship of Jesus to God can best be presented as that of a son to his father. But theologians are right to be suspicious as to whether the analogy has always been taken on board by the man and woman in the pew - a great many of whom have simply thought that God was a Father rather than just like a Father. And what about the many human fathers who have been uncaring and downright cruel to their children?

Many people are becoming nervous about Father/Son language as applied to God. Feminists are absolutely furious at the exclusively masculine terminology which has previously been employed in all the teachings of the Christian Church. They are asking why couldn't we talk of God the Mother? And they have a point; not least because until recent times human genetics imagined that the Father was the only real begetter with the mother acting simply as the incubator for the fertilised egg – that is what is behind our use of surnames and succession to land and titles by Father to son succession only.

There is a third factor working for a rediscovery of God as spirit - there is in modern society an increasing distrust of tradition and of all types of institutions. We now talk (and maybe work for) a pluralist society in which everyone can "do their own thing" according to their own lights. People who want to relate that approach to life to Christian faith will be keen to

involve the Holy Spirit. "Blowing where he lists and dividing to each man severally as he will." But some very odd groups have been formed under that banner. Indeed if you've had dealings with the new right in religion the charismatic and born again groups who are quite sure they are spirit filled, you will soon discover that the other side of that particular coin is too often a burning conviction that only their approach is valid and that everyone else is in on the road to nowhere. What they forget and we must remember is Saint John's exhortation to *test the spirit carefully* and make truth our criterion - not just enthusiasm on its own. "By their fruits ye shall know them." In all the Churches today there is a highly dangerous chasm opening up between unthinking traditionalism on the one hand and those who seem to make it up as they go along on the other. These new divisions are already making the familiar obstacles to Christian unity look like child's play.

But all of us whether on the left or the right, whether devotees of the new style or the old are only too liable to fall for the oldest temptation of them all - to claim the authority of the Holy Spirit for what the old prayer book calls "the devices and desires of our own hearts" - to seek security in that which is not God, whether it be in 1662 language or in an approach to the Bible which tries to ignore the scholarship of the past 100 years; or in a view of the Church of God which would inhibit the power of the Holy Spirit to show his people *any* new ways!

In truth the Holy Spirit is that contemporary aspect of the eternal God which comes to us as a transforming power. And that power is not to be controlled by institutions or ecclesiastics: as if the Spirit could be given by measure and turned on and off like a tap. For we depend on the Creator Spirit given in full measure to bring us into communion with God. Moreover the Spirit is "Christ-Shaped". The Father has sent Him to us so that he may, as it were, take of what belongs to the Son and may show it to us afresh in this and every age.

But how may we expect to recognise the spirit of God knocking on our door? The Spirit comes in many and various ways; often through our dissatisfaction with our lives as they are; often through our love for others - for when we love most then we are at our most God-like and are least engrossed in ourselves; often through our pity for the plight of those infinitely less well-off than ourselves. One of the most obvious ways of all is through our consciences - even those who pretend to have no conscience about anything usually have a lively sense of what is fair and unfair especially when applied to themselves and therefore *must* have a conscience.

Certainly it is in our own attitudes to other people that we give the game away and show whether *we* are Spirit-filled or not. For it is the Spirit who builds up a sense of common humanity, a sense of a caring community. This is not something that ultimately can be organised or planned for because it can only spring from a common obedience, humility and forbearance - from a concentration not on our own skills but on the gifts of others, all of which can only come when we open ourselves to the Spirit of God within and around us. And so on this Feast of Pentecost we pray "Come Holy Spirit, enkindle the hearts of your faithful people with the fire of your love."