

## **SERMON: Sunday – 12 June 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Becoming Better People**

Romans 5:1-5

John 16:12-16

Let's begin with a reflection from this week's Spill the Beans:

I can't take it all in.

It's all too much for my wee finite mind.

How can I understand an eternal infinite God?

Do you ever get so frustrated

because you want to know more about God?

Sometimes I think I know everything

but I cannot grasp the real deep meaning of God:

the meaning of whatever is in my heart;

the meaning of the love of God;

the meaning of the suffering of the world.

I don't have the ability to fathom the mystery of God, the eternal infinite God.

It is so hard to understand God at times.

The truth is, Jesus said he has much more to say to us but he also said that we cannot bear or grasp his words for now.

So let us learn to live, day by day

and word by word

with the help of the Holy Spirit,

piece by piece

like a divine jigsaw puzzle

until the day we can get the full picture of God,

when we meet God face to face.

Jesus said that the Spirit of truth would come and would declare whatever Jesus gives him to declare. In other words, the Spirit would be a kind of Messenger from Jesus. We might say, an Advocate Messenger.

I suppose in his earthly life, Jesus of Nazareth was sent by God to a particular group of people at a particular time in history. But in this way, with the Spirit sent to us as his Advocate, Jesus can be with anyone who so desires God's divine presence at anytime.

The Spirit declares and breathes truth into our lives.

The same Spirit who was there at the beginning, breathing creation into being and who has been breathing life into living beings ever since.

(SLIDE)

The Hebrew word for Spirit is ruach, which means breath, and is such an intimate way of describing God's presence within.

In Genesis 2:7, it is after God breathes into Adam that Adam comes alive. The ruach here is used to mean "breath of life," and is also used, for example, in Ezekiel 37, when the dry bones in the valley come to life as a result of God's ruach, God's holy, living breath.

All of creation is breathed in to life by God's ruach, the breath that brings together Creator and creature, so that all life derives from one Source, which is God.

All of life has the one Source. All is connected by the breath of God.

The Scriptures prove that God can breath the kiss of life into dry places in order to bring them alive, wake them up, help them believe, give them hope, calm their fear, remove their shame, and let them know that they are loved.

God is constantly present and breathes with the breath of the world.

(SLIDE)

The prophetic Korean writer, Grace Ji-Sun Kim puts it, "Even in situations of death, sorrow, despair, and hopelessness, the Spirit can move us and create a space of joy to be alive. If it (sic) can bring back to life what was dead, what more can the Spirit do for us?"

Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Homebrewed Christianity Guide to the Holy Spirit: Hand-Raisers, Han, and the Holy Ghost* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018)

Notice her use of the personal pronoun "it" to describe the Spirit. She could've equally used, him or her. What matters is that it's, he's, she's an ungendered person with whom we have a relationship (through our faith in Christ).

Interestingly, in the author's description of that book she says that "it is time for the Holy Spirit to get its own street cred!"

I don't think Jesus bothered much about street cred but I think Grace Kim is meaning the tendency for parts of the church, for Christians, to stumble along without a reliance on the moment by moment creative empowering of the Spirit.

Sometimes life gets tough and we get brought down by cares and worries and illnesses and trials, that we forget that we are Spirit filled beings made to be vessels of divine love and joy and peace; and that we are being made into carriers of that grace into the world.

Paul in the reading from Romans 5 more or less says that you never know when what is currently afflicting you might be the birth pangs of a new hope springing forth. The Apostle gives his readers the steps to get there and it begins with boasting of one's afflictions, knowing that endurance will result, then character will be built and then hope will sustain.

(SLIDE)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

How often have we missed the opportunity to build character and find an ensuing hope because we grumbled about our afflictions rather than see them as opportunities?

Paul's advice to boast in the hope of the Gospel as well as through the trials means, I think, that we are to be steadfast in life no matter what happens.

The Greek word for 'to boast' also means 'to rejoice', or 'to hold one's head up'. So when trouble comes, as it will, one aims to hold up one's head because of one's hope in the ultimate goodness and rightness of God, what Paul here calls the hope of sharing in the glory of God.

Though usually unwanted and uncalled for, tests and trials provide opportunities to exercise hope of healing, deliverance, justice, something better. And that act of the will to think that way, inspired and enabled, of course, by the Holy Spirit advising us all the time, leads to a steadfastness which can carry one through, even though we might be barely able to stand through it.

But when we can then it makes us better people, better because we've experienced what other people experience. We've gained a better degree of empathy, better able to listen and to speak knowledgeably about what others are going through.

And all this in turn hopefully leads to better character and an ever growing hoping in the goodness and love of God.

How might we begin to put this into practise this week? As the Spirit moves in and through each of us, with the power to change us and our circumstances,

how might our character grow and our hope increase and be a blessing to those we love and those we've yet to meet?

Come, Holy Spirit,  
Inflame our hearts with your love and your hope.  
In Jesus name.  
Amen.