

SERMON – 2/6/24

'The Revealing Spirit'

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

“‘What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived’ – the things God has prepared for those who love him–these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.” (1 Cor.2:9-10)

As human beings we have some pretty amazing abilities – our senses enable us to do some wonderful things which we only really appreciate if they are taken away from us. We can see, and we use our eyes to enjoy all sorts of things – the scenery around us, books to read, the expression on someone's face – and only those who have had their eyesight taken from them (partially or fully) can appreciate just what they used to take for granted. We can hear, and we use our ears to enjoy things like music or the chirping of birds or other people's conversation – sometimes you may think it would be better not to hear what other folk say but if you lost your hearing you wouldn't say that. We can taste and enjoy a rich variety of different flavours; we can smell food cooking or a rose in bloom or cut grass after rainfall; we can touch and find pleasure in stroking a dog or a cat or the comfortable feeling of a familiar item of clothing. If some damage occurs to any of these senses we are deprived of something we have enjoyed in the past and we realise just how much we have lost.

Of course you could always say that dogs have a better sense of smell and a wider range of hearing than we do, or that a bird of prey has much better eye-sight than we do, but what sets us apart from the animals in physical terms is that we have the ability to reason and we can do much more intricate things with the information that our brains receive from our senses than the animals can. Seeing people gradually losing their ability to reason is a very distressing thing because it is an attack on one of the central attributes of our humanity.

But there are limits to the wonders of our senses and of our minds, because we cannot see God with our eyes or hear the voice of God with our ears, and nor can we know God with our minds. In our reading this morning, the apostle Paul paraphrases words from the prophet Isaiah: “What no one ever

saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God prepared for those who love him." And he goes on to comment that it is by the Spirit of God that God is revealed to us.

Spiritual insight is a kind of sixth sense that we must receive if we are to know God. It's not something we can develop ourselves no more than we could grow a third eye or develop a sense of smell in our fingertips. It is a gift that we can only receive. And rather in the way that someone born blind might feel in receiving the gift of sight, once we receive this spiritual sense we do not know how we could have lived without it because it opens up to us a whole new dimension.

How many times must Abraham have looked up into the star-spangled sky before God promised that his descendants would be that numerous. But after his spirit was awakened within him and he 'believed God,' then every time that he looked at the heavens and saw thousands of stars glittering there he would pause to praise God for His goodness and for His promise.

And that same experience is ours if we have the Spirit of God. How many human beings thrill to see a rainbow in the sky – and what a beautiful sight it is for the eyes to behold – but for the Christian it is so much more than a beautiful sight, it is a reminder of the faithfulness of God. How many human beings rejoice to see the seeds that they have planted in the ground grow to bear fruit at harvest time. But for us who are in Christ there is still more to marvel at for we see in the new life that comes from a seed an image of the resurrection that awaits our mortal bodies even though we must die. How many people derive strength from the words of the Bible – there are wise words here at a human level for all people, but there is so much more for those who by the Holy Spirit discern this to be the living Word of God.

So in all kinds of ways, spiritual insight – the gift of God to those who will receive it – will heighten the experience of the other senses and open the door to another dimension of life altogether, what Jesus calls life in all its fullness.

This morning we come to sit at the Lord's Table and as we do so I want to reflect with you on what this morning's passage has to say to us about how God is revealed to us. If you take time to study the passage you will find a whole succession of statements

that draw us away from physical and human things to the spiritual and the divine. Paul tells us that the impact of his preaching was not based on eloquence or human wisdom or wise and persuasive words but through Jesus Christ and Him crucified, a demonstration of the Spirit's power despite human weakness, fear and trembling. He points his readers away from the wisdom of the rulers of this age who are coming to nothing to God's wisdom which has been hidden from before time began but is now being revealed through Spirit-taught words. And he asks us to leave behind merely human judgements in favour of having the mind of Christ.

If we have the spiritual insight that the Holy Spirit gives us, the water we use in baptism and the bread and wine we share at the Lord's Table offer us far more than our eyes can see or our ears hear or our minds can grasp.

Normally we use water for drinking and cleaning but as we take the same element to use for baptism the Spirit enables us to recognise the water of life which refreshes our soul rather than our body. The Spirit reveals to us that just as God saved His people Israel through the waters of the Sea, so are we saved; that just as water can be sprinkled to baptise a person so through Christ's sprinkled blood are we cleansed from sin; that just as a person can be immersed in water to be baptised so are we buried with Christ to rise again with Him. It's not the physical water that makes baptism real but the working of the Holy Spirit that enables us to celebrate what Christ has done for us.

In the same way, we normally use bread to nourish our bodies and and wine for physical refreshment but as we take those elements to use at the Lord's Table, the Spirit enables us to experience a whole new level of nourishment and refreshment. As we break bread and share the cup we are reminded that it is Jesus who truly satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst and that it is by Christ's broken body and shed blood that we are saved. It's not the physical bread and wine that make communion with God a reality but the working of the Holy Spirit that enables us to see beyond a piece of bread and a sip of wine and to take hold by faith of the unsearchable riches of Christ and of the faithfulness of God to keep His promises.

Some might say we should just dispense with the physical

elements altogether and devote all our attention to the spiritual realities of which they speak, but just as the spiritual gives a different dimension to the physical, so physical things can bring a deeper understanding of the spiritual. We've not been given our physical senses only to have them over-ruled by the Spirit. Rather the Holy Spirit gives a new fulness of life to our senses and to our minds. The sight of the stars was not superfluous to Abraham's spiritual experience – it confirmed God's promise to him every time he saw them. The water of baptism is not irrelevant but reveals and confirms God's grace to us. The broken bread and the poured out wine are not just tokens – sharing in these elements together confirms to us the reality of Christ's death and resurrection and brings these things home to us in a wonderfully expressive way.

Augustine described a sacrament as 'a visible sign of a sacred thing, a visible form of an invisible grace.' Calvin said that the sacraments are signs that seal the promise given in the Word and make it more vivid and sure to those who partake in them. We've been given our senses and our minds and what marvellous gifts they are, but how much more wonderful do our senses and minds become to us if we have received that other gift through the Holy Spirit, the opening of our eyes to the wonders of God's grace, the unstopping of our ears to hear the Word of Life, the unlocking of our mind to know God in Jesus Christ.

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him – but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit." As we prepare ourselves to sit together at the Lord's Table this morning may we open ourselves to go beyond what our physical senses can take in and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the fulness of what Christ did for us at Calvary, so that when we see and touch and smell and taste the bread and wine and hear again the story of Christ's death and resurrection for us, we don't only share in the outward aspects of this holy meal but feed upon the very life of Jesus Himself in our hearts by faith.

Without that spiritual wisdom and insight into what we are doing here we are engaging in a pretty meaningless ritual. As Paul writes here: "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them

foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." (v.14) But *with* the enlightening grace of God we are transported far beyond the realm of normal human sensory experience and into the very presence of the Lord Almighty.

Come Holy Spirit, and reveal to us the things of Christ.