

The Holy Spirit: at Work in Jesus, and in Us.

Today's gospel reading is the first story that appears in Matthew's gospel. In it, the author sets the stage for his description of the ministry of Jesus, by establishing his "credentials." For example, he tells us that Mary was a virgin when she was found to be "with child." Also, Matthew describes the turmoil Joseph went through when he discovered that Mary was pregnant, and how it was all resolved. Finally, Matthew tells us how the name of Jesus was selected, and what the name meant. However, none of these things are what Matthew wants us to focus on as being most important.

The point that Matthew wants us to focus on, is something he mentions twice in these eight verses. In verse eighteen, we are told that Mary was "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." And in verse twenty, the angel says that "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This, then, is the point Matthew thinks is of greatest importance: that, in the birth of Jesus, *the Holy Spirit was at work*. What we need to figure out, however, is "Why?" Why is this so important to Matthew?

Well, if we are to understand what Matthew was trying to say about Jesus, we have to read it like a first-century Jew, and not like a twenty-first century Christian, because much of what we take for granted about the Holy Spirit comes from two thousand years of Christian theology and experience, and would have been foreign to Matthew. So, let's put on our first-century reading glasses.

According to ancient Jewish beliefs, the Holy Spirit had at least four definite functions. First, *the Holy Spirit brought God's truth to God's people*. It was the Holy Spirit who told the prophets what to say. It was the Holy Spirit who taught the people of God what to do. Therefore, Matthew understands Jesus to be a person who was uniquely empowered to tell us what God is really like, and what God wants us to be like. When Jesus says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father," Matthew wants us to see, in Jesus, the love and compassion and mercy of God, more than in any other person, place, or thing.

The second thing the ancient Jews believed about the Holy Spirit, was that the Spirit *enabled us to recognize God's truth when we see it*. When ignorance, prejudice or fear might blind us to God's truth because, Matthew recognized that, because God's Spirit was at work in Jesus, he was the only one who could open our eyes to the truth.

Third, the ancient Jews *connected the Spirit of God with the work of creation*. In the book of Genesis, we read how a wind from God moved upon the face of the world, and

chaos became ordered. Later, the Psalmist would tell us that “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (33:6). In the Old Testament, references to God’s breath or wind were usually references to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is the Spirit which is the creator of the world and the giver of life. Thus, Matthew is telling his readers that, in Jesus, God’s creative and life-giving power has come into the world. It was a power to bring order and new life where, previously, there was only disorder and emptiness.

Finally, the ancient Jews associated the Spirit *with the work of re-creation*. The prophet Ezekiel draws a grim picture of a valley of dry bones. But he describes how the bones became alive when God said, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live” (37:1-14). In other words, when people are spiritually dead, the Spirit of God can bring about new life, new hope, new purpose. So then, Matthew is telling us that, in Jesus, there came into this world the power which can re-create life, which can revive long-abandoned ideals, and which can reawaken our desire to do good. In Jesus, we can find renewal when our lives have lost any meaning.

Clearly, there is so much more in our gospel reading than a simple description of the facts surrounding the birth of Jesus. Rather, Matthew wants us to know that, in the birth of Jesus, the Spirit of God was at work as with no other person before. And I mention all this, so we might understand that the same Spirit that was operating in Jesus’ life, is also operating in our own lives.

The same Spirit who brought God’s truth and inspiration to the prophets and patriarchs of ancient Israel, and to the followers of Jesus, is doing the same for us. But this is not for the purpose of making us special, but rather to empower us to become, in our own time, the agents of God, bringing his truth to those places where it does not yet exist.

The same Spirit which was at work in the beginning, bringing order out of chaos, is at work within us. Like Jesus, we also are the agents of order and of peace. Where there are broken lives and relationships, where there is need for healing, we are sent, to bring to that situation, God’s power to heal and make new.

In other words, we are God’s hands and feet in this world: we are to go into places where the Name of God is not known. We are God’s mouth and voice: we are to tell people about the Good News of what God has done for us. We are God’s arms and hands: we are to help raise people up when they are down, and embrace them when they are lonely and afraid.

If all this sounds a bit intimidating for you, it is for me as well. But I’ve always found it comforting and encouraging to know that, just as God’s Spirit was present with Jesus, giving him strength to do the things he was called to do, God’s Spirit will be with us as well.

Therefore, let us go out into the world, not in fear and anxiety because *our* resources are so few, but rather let us go filled with joy and peace because *God's* resources are so great.
Amen.