

We are this morning on this Pentecost Sunday...you would perhaps expect I'd be preaching from Acts chapter 2 verses 1 to 13 (which I've already read), but actually we're going to be looking at Mark chapter 1 verses 1 to 13, and we'll come to the reason for that in a moment or two but let's read these word first, the first 13 verses of Mark's Gospel.

[Reading Mark 1:1-13]

So, as I've said before so much of what we read in the Bible is symbolic, so we cannot read it too literally. I think our understanding of the Holy Spirit is an obvious example of this; how do you describe the Holy Spirit when it is invisible, when it is inaudible, when it's intangible? The only thing that we can use to describe the Spirit is found in symbols. The very first verses of Mark's Gospel here help us to glimpse how the Spirit works by referring to three symbols, but we've got to sort of winkle them out from the passage.

Firstly, we have the symbol of the **Holy**. In a very simple and obvious sense, what kind of spirit is the Spirit of God? He is a Holy spirit (as we read in verse 8). The word "holy" means set apart from mundane, everyday use. In the Jewish temple there were special lamp stands, altars, basins, knives and other implements which were used for the burnt offerings that were presented on the altar, and so these items were referred to as "holy". And in the Old Testament also we discover that things could have degrees of holiness as well. So the temple was regarded as a holy place, but within the temple there was a "holy place" where only certain priests could enter; and then of course there was the "most holy place", or the "holies of holies", where only the high priest could enter, once a year. of course the above examples (or the examples I've given rather, they're not above for you, they're above for me), the examples I've given, they are examples of ritual holiness, and they were attributed to inanimate objects. So those utensils, those items, used in the in the temple had no choice as to whether they were used as a holy object – they had no will or choice as to whether they were holy. But, of course, the meaning of the word developed so that it took on the idea of a person's desire to be holy. Holiness, then, was the condition under which God revealed himself to humankind. You'll remember that when Moses came before the Lord he saw himself there as he saw the burning bush and God said to him: "Take off your shoes, take off your sandals, for where you are standing is Holy Ground," not because it was in some temple but because God presence was manifest there in that place. So then, Holiness is the condition under which God revealed himself to humankind. It is this kind of spirit which John the Baptist was promising (in this passage) will be offered to everyone, so when the Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 1:15 (he says these words): "Just as he who called you is Holy so be holy in all you do." He's calling us to be people of the Spirit of Holiness. Remember is not calling us to perfection – we cannot be sinlessly perfect, we make mistakes; but what he is calling us to do is to behave with an awareness that we are special to God. And he's calling us as well to be committed to seeking his revelation and his direction in our lives. So that's the first symbol I wanted to just pull out of this passage, the idea of: the **Holy**.

Secondly, we have the symbol of **Anointing**. The word "Christ", which we have in verse 1 (the very first verse of Mark's Gospel): "The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ the son of God..." and, it's funny, I think the word "Christ" - we almost think of it as Jesus' surname, but it's not! It's a word that has specific meaning, and it means that Jesus the "Anointed". Anointing with oil was a symbol of the Spirit of God being given to someone, in the Old Testament in particular, but it was

for a specific service, for a specific reason. So, for instance, in the Old Testament we find Aaron was anointed to prepare him for being a priest (in Exodus chapter 29). We find that Elisha was anointed with oil in preparation for becoming a prophet (in 1 Kings chapter 19), and we find that David was made ready for becoming King also by being anointed (in 1 Samuel chapter 13). It's interesting that in certain circumstances this symbolic ritual is still used: so during Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953 (and I wasn't there!) she was also anointed with oil as part of the ceremony, and when I was just researching this a bit this week I discovered that she specifically asked that the anointing as it happened would not be televised; so it's the only part of the Coronation Service that wasn't televised – the television cameras pulled away whilst the anointing happened because Queen Elizabeth felt it was such a personal and holy moment. These three roles that I've just referred to: Priest, Prophet and King (all of which anointing was used to prepare people for those ministries), each of those three roles gained a greater spiritual meaning in the life of Jesus, of course. Jesus was in a very special way the Priest; in Hebrews he's described as "our high priest" so that we no longer need any other priest to stand between us and God, and present our petitions, and mediate God's presence. He was also a Prophet. Speaking words of truth to the authorities around him, to the Jewish authorities, but also speaking into the lives of individuals and communities as he moved among them. And, of course, he was also the King, the King of Kings, but a king who did not come in the glory of earthly splendour, and didn't compare himself to a mighty lion but, rather, described himself as the Lamb coming to make a sacrifice – so the king that came offering to sacrifice himself. Jesus himself recognised that these three roles of Priest, Prophet and King all came together in himself, as in Luke 4:18 he speaks of the Spirit anointing him in a way that fulfilled Old Testament expectations of the Christ, the Anointed One. Let me just read those words from Luke 4:18: "The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the Year of the Lord's favour." Jesus recognises these words were fulfilled in his life in that unique way that we believe. We recognise at Pentecost that the Spirit comes to us so that we can be enabled to continue Jesus' work in the world. Filled with his Spirit we are now the hands and feet, and voice, of the Anointed One.

However, to do this, we need to recognise the amazing potential that God has placed in each one of us, that we so often overlook, or dismiss. I remember reading a story many years ago by a Danish theologian and philosopher called Soren Kierkegaard – he was around in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in Denmark – and he was scathingly critical of Danish life, and one of his main targets was the church in Denmark. He found the way that it functioned to be so far removed from the teachings of Jesus as to be almost laughable. He spared no part of the church and heavily criticised the state-paid professional clergy who he felt so watered down Jesus' message that it virtually became a whole other gospel. He said that, in particular the clergy, their dreary fault-finding way of living and preaching cause ordinary churchgoers to lack any sense of passion or commitment in their lives. And to illustrate this Soren Kierkegaard told a story of a Magical Land inhabited only by ducks, and he spoke of their duck church. "One fine day," he wrote, "all of the ducks dutifully waddled to duck church where the duck vicar stood up to deliver his sermon. He opened his duck Bible to where it spoke of God's great gift to ducks: wings. 'With wings', said the duck preacher, 'we ducks can fly, we can mount up like eagles and soar in to the heavens! We can escape the confinement of pens and fences: we can experience the utter euphoria of unfettered freedom! We must give God thanks for a great gift as wings!' In response to this all the ducks in the duck church stood up on their webbed feet and quacked a hearty 'Amen'. And then they turned around and waddled back home." Kierkegaard told this story to show that it's possible to believe mentally in God's greatness and blessings to us without ever actually living out that belief

practically.

So we've had two particular symbols: we've looked at the symbol of the Holy, we've looked at the symbol of Anointing.

The third symbol I'd like to refer to is the symbol of a **Dove**. In the culture of Jesus' day, spirits could be charged with violence and evil. In the very chapter that we're looking at here, later on in that chapter in verse 26 we find that Jesus drove out an evil spirit; he said (in verse 25): "Be quiet! Come out of him!" And the evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. So, spirits could be charged with violence and evil within the culture of Jesus' day. It would therefore have been all the more remarkable that the Spirit of God was seen by everyone in, our passage here, to be a very different kind of spirit. The Spirit came with gentleness, like a dove; and if you imagine, think of a dove landing – it lands so very gently and carefully. And in verse 10 we have that picture of the Spirit coming and landing on Jesus like a dove. And, of course, with the coming of the Spirit like a dove we have the words of reassurance and tenderness that Jesus heard, saying: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." This is surely the same quality of brooding love with which the Spirit hovered over the potential of the yet-to-be-created world (in Genesis chapter 1). You know there's nothing to fear in the coming of the Spirit of God, because his concern is only ever for our good. What a wonder it is that the Spirit who hovered over the chaos of the waters in Genesis that is the self-same Spirit who anointed Jesus in the Jordan river, and that is the self-same Spirit who offers to come and enliven you and me! The Spirit of God did not leave Jesus to bask in this moment of tenderness and reassurance; instead, we read that the Spirit drove him into the desert where he was tempted by Satan. In our own lives as well, it so often seems that times of joy and wonder are followed by times of testing. But whether we feel we are amongst angels or wild animals (as we see in verse 13 for Jesus) we can know that God's Spirit is always with us.

I pray that this Pentecost Sunday you will sense the Spirit coming to you in gentleness, in reassurance – reassurance of your identity in him – that you are his daughter, or his son, in whom he is well pleased. Pray that God will bless you this Pentecost Sunday. Bless you.