

#### 4:1 MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.**

*Genesis 1:1-3*

**By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.**

*Psalms 33:6*

Right from the start, even before creation took place, the Spirit was there. The Spirit is the dynamic agent of God's creation, hovering like a dove, with warm, beating heart, over the formless waters. Nothing can happen without his initiative. No life, warmth, beauty, light or order. We wouldn't be here to read these words, if the Spirit hadn't started it all.

The Spirit is God's breath, *pneuma*, breathed-out life-force. When God speaks, something happens. Similarly when God speaks to create mankind (Gen 1:26), he breathes into their nostrils the breath of life (Gen 2:7). The Spirit is God's uttered will, translated into energy. I am here because God wanted me here.

John brings all this together in the opening words of his Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' (John 1:1-5)

The Word is Jesus. 'With God' describes his loving and ever-present relationship to God. John doesn't explicitly use the language of 'the Spirit' here, because he is focusing on Jesus (whom he doesn't name either). But the creativity, the love, the light and life, and the radical distinction from 'darkness', are descriptive of the Spirit just as much as in the original Genesis passage. What is new in John is that the Jesus who is Word become flesh (Jn 1:14) is fully pre-existent with the Father and the Spirit before creation ever takes place.

*The Christ I have invited to share my life is the Spirit of God who has always been present with him, and who got creation going.*

#### 4:2 GOD IN FULL

**God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.**

*Acts 10:38*

**In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.**

*Colossians 1:19*

**From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.**

*John 1:16 NRSV*

Here you are at the checkout in your local supermarket, wondering how much your loaded trolley is going to add up to, when you are joined in the queue by a well-known sporting celebrity or TV star. They chat to you quite naturally, but your whole world is changed. For a moment you have been in touch with greatness.

Our whole world was changed when the Creator God who fills heaven and earth came among us as a human being. Yet he did not appear to have celebrity status. His name, Jesus, was a fairly common one, and his home town, Nazareth, was unremarkable.

There are deep, deep mysteries here. How could God squeeze himself, as it were, into a pint pot yet remain in charge of the universe? How could this Jesus person be simultaneously fully divine and fully human? If Jesus was so ordinary, how could he be so totally special? And – the biggest mystery of all, perhaps – how could he become the Holy Spirit living in you and me?

Language and reasoning may be inadequate to describe or explain the self-revelation of God. Maybe, if this is the way God has chosen to do things, we should just accept it and shut up. Yet he has chosen to involve me, and I need to know how to respond. Fall on my knees? Leap around punching the air? Give all my money away to feed the starving and homeless? Join a monastic community?

*Lord, this was your idea, to come and live among us, to come to where I am, to share my life. If this is what is meant by the Holy Spirit, teach me how to live your life of grace in my weakness. God's undeserved kindness and unreserved strength. Grace in, grace out.*

#### 4:3 GOD WITH US

**The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’).**

*Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:14*

**Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.**

*John 14:23*

Jesus Immanuel. The two names of Christ. This is the heart of the Christian faith and the foundation of all Christian theology and teaching. The birth of a baby in a Bethlehem cow byre was the moment when God arrived among us as a human being. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost was the moment when God came to live in each and every one of his believing people.

A chariot race in the Circus Maximus at Rome was an incredibly exciting spectacle. The drivers had to complete seven laps of the stadium, circling round the stone turning-posts at either end. The secret was to graze the hub of the inside wheel on the stonework, imparting extra turning-power to the chariot. This was an expert skill, gaining valuable seconds but also risking total disaster.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to circle around the truths of his presence among us in the incarnation and within us through the Spirit. The closer we can get to these twin ‘turning points’, the nearer we will get to the love of God. It will involve us heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30).

The vision of the Bible is God living among his people and walking with them for eternity (Revelation 21:3). He has given us a training manual for this in his word. Are we prepared to put heart and soul, and mental and even physical effort, into developing the close obedience to Christ which is the best evidence that we love him?

*If the Spirit is ‘Jesus on the inside’, how am I relating to him? Am I prepared to risk the wreckage of my earthly hopes on staying as close to him as possible? Or am I hedging my bets and maintaining a cautious distance? Forget the crowd. Jesus is my turning-point.*

#### 4:4 VIRGIN BIRTH

**The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.**

*Luke 1:35*

**Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.**

*Matthew 1:20*

**God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.**

*Galatians 4:4*

If Jesus was to be fully human and like us in every respect, why is his birth so different? Why do we need to believe that Mary was a virgin when she conceived her first child?

Some football matches are completely altered by the arrival on the field of a single player, who has been on the bench during the first half, and is brought on by the manager in the second half to initiate a change of tactics in order to win the game. Jesus’ birth was a ‘game-changer’ for the human race. How come?

Paul calls Jesus ‘the last Adam’ (1 Corinthians 15:45). Newman’s hymn puts it like this: ‘O loving wisdom of our God! / When all was sin and shame, / a second Adam to the fight / and to the rescue came.’ Human nature was not originally sinful; but once we chose our own will instead of God’s, sin entered the world and spread to all mankind (Romans 5:12), bringing shameful defeat and spiritual death. Jesus has come on in the second half, as it were, and has changed everything by triumphing over sin in his own life and on the cross. Through him we can ‘win the cup’ of eternal life.

Joseph and Mary both knew for sure that no human agency was involved in her becoming pregnant. Just as the ‘first Adam’ became a living being when the breath of life entered his nostrils (Genesis 2:7), so the ‘last Adam’ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, as we say in the Apostles’ Creed. Jesus changes everything. We can win!

*Lord Jesus, I acknowledge that there are mysteries I may never solve. But I trust your word and your Spirit to ‘lead me into all the truth’ (John 16:13). Thank you for changing the game for me, and for all of us.*

#### 4:5 THANKSGIVING

**Make thanksgiving your sacrifice to God.** *Psalm 50:14 ESV fn*

**The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.** *Isaiah 61:1, 3*

**My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.** *Luke 1:46-47*

It is Christmas Day, and everywhere people are giving thanks to God for sending his Son Jesus to live among us. Such thanksgiving costs nothing. This gift of the Christ-child comes to us out of the love and kindness of God (Titus 3:4). We receive him and return the glory to the Giver.

Yet there is grief too, the grief of the refugee, the broken family, the lost loved one, the ebbing away of hope, the wreckage caused by evil. How can we maintain a steady flow of thankfulness when things are so clearly out of joint, so desperately need putting right?

Mary was a teenager whose comfortable world had collapsed around her. Rejection by her family and village, separation from the man she was engaged to, certain dishonour and possible death, her baby likely to be born in exile and poverty – how could she sing with joy to God? Yet she does.

We could understand if she felt resentment, like Hannah, or settled into a state of resignation, like Naomi. But it seems she had found a place of receptiveness, allowing the promise of the angel and the Holy Spirit's overshadowing to do their full work. This wasn't passive acquiescence, it was the delight of receiving a Christmas present for which she could be genuinely and totally grateful.

*Maybe true gratitude is a work of the Holy Spirit which I need to ask to happen more consistently in me. Not just at big occasions, but in the ups and downs of life. Mary wasn't spared suffering, nor must I expect to be. 'Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning' (Psalm 30:5). All I need to sacrifice is my graceless ill humour!*

#### 4:6 WITNESSING UNDER PRESSURE

**I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.** *Luke 21:15*

**They could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave Stephen as he spoke.** *Acts 6:10*

Stephen (whose Greek name means 'crown') was the first Christian after Pentecost to die as a result of testifying to his Master, Jesus Christ. Our word 'martyr' comes from the word for 'witness'. Those who die for their witness to Christ are said to win a martyr's crown.

We were visiting St Stephen's monastery in the far north of Iran, a little sanctuary set among high mountains and river torrents, with its depictions of the savage stoning that caused his death, presided over by Saul of Tarsus. As we were having our picnic nearby, we got into conversation with three Iranians who told us of their military service in the war with Iraq. One of them even pulled off his shirt to show us the wounds he had suffered for his country. 'We were martyrs,' he declared. 'But no-one cared. We have no war pension.'

These were not wise words. We might have been agents of the government who could have informed against them. In any case, the comparison with Stephen was hardly justified. But when a Christian is up against the authorities, we are promised that Jesus himself will stand by us, as he did with Paul before the emperor Nero. 'The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed' (2 Timothy 4:17).

We should never seek martyrdom for its own sake. But time and again, martyrs' last words have had a profound effect on their adversaries. 'Lord, open the king of England's eyes!' cried William Tyndale before being burnt at the stake. Three years later, Henry VIII licensed the English Bible to be placed in all churches.

*Lord, thank you for the times when I've been able to say the right thing under pressure. Forgive me if this hasn't been the case. Help those who are called to give their lives for you to find appropriate words of witness.*