

May 31, 2009
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on us ...
Isaiah 11:1-3; Acts 2:1-12, 42-47

"Our hearts are restless," wrote Augustine in the 4th century, *"until they find their rest in you."* In the 17th century, Blaise Pascal wrote, *"There is a God-shaped hollow in the human heart that nothing else can fill."* We all have a deep spiritual longing.

We're talking this morning about that spiritual yearning within us. But we need to be careful! We have inherited a Greek perspective in which we often think of ourselves as a two part person: a separate body and soul. Some of us work hard on keeping our bodies fit, but ignore our souls. Others focus just on the spiritual side of our lives, figuring our bodies will just decay, fall apart, and die - our souls are the spiritual and eternal part. That is good Platonism (following Plato) - but not good Christian theology!

In the Christian tradition, we are whole persons - intimate, inseparable unities of body and soul. Our bodies and souls are two facets of God's one gift of life to us. Our souls are the very life-breath of God in us. But our bodies are also created by God. We are called to keep ourselves spiritually growing and alive through spiritual disciplines . . . but also physically healthy and well through decent diet and exercise, too. We look forward to resurrection, one day, when our bodies and spirits/souls are made new and whole and perfect once more and we - as perfect and perfected unities of soul and body - enjoy God's presence forever (but that's another sermon).

It all starts with God

This morning we focus on the soul facet of our life (remembering it is interwoven with who we are physically). Our spiritual longing is a gift from God. Somehow intimately connected with our identity as creations in the image of God, is this God-given longing for relationship with Himself. That restlessness within us will not go away until we find God. God does not give up. His Spirit will nag at our souls till we respond. That may drive us crazy, but it's a wonderful gift - His gracious love will never abandon us; He will keep hounding us to respond to and accept His grace.

God reaches out because of His love - He knows we live most humanly, most completely, and most freely only when we live in a relationship with Him, putting Him at the centre of our lives. To be truly human - fully human - is to be centred in our Creator - God Himself.

Of course we can ignore Him, subsume His voice below various vices, drown out His call with work or fun or busyness, argue with ourselves that God's voice cannot be real . . . but our avoidance, substitute-searches, and rationalizations cannot change the ultimate reality - He loves us; He is continually pursuing us; He has not given up on us (or anyone else). Nothing/no one else can ultimately satisfy us. God is calling to each of us . . . and He will not stop calling . . .

How does He do that? Isaiah 11 (and John 14-16) help us know that sometimes we hear God as

- Our conscience - God speaks to us as "*the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding*" (Isaiah 11:2) - the One who helps us discern right from wrong, wisdom from foolishness, good from evil. Jesus says, "*The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ... he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment*" (John 14:26, 16:8). We have that gift of wisdom and understanding through the Holy Spirit - but we can choose to ignore, reject, or rationalize away His leading and counsel ...
- A still, small voice - God speaks to us as "*the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord*" (Isaiah 11:2) - the One who helps us know and see and experience God. "*When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me*" (John 15:26). If we listen, we will know that God is with us through the ups, downs, and challenges of life. We listen when we read the Bible, expectantly. We listen in prayer and reflection. We listen to the wise counsel of godly friends. Again, we can choose to fight against this by purposely plugging our ears and shutting our eyes, listening to the Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens of the world who argue God cannot exist. We can - purposely or just accidentally - make our lives so noisy with busyness we cannot hear God anymore. But He is still there ...
- In the ordinary and extraordinary of life - God speaks to us as "*the Spirit of counsel and of power*" (Isaiah 11:2). If we open our eyes and ears we'll see God in a thousand places: we will hear Him in the wise counsel of trusted friends; we will see Him in the cherry blossoms on the trees; we will feel His power in the craft of the physician who brings us healing; we will know Him in the fellowship of good friends; we will be aware of His leading when our leaders make wise decisions. God is very much at work in our world in a myriad of ways. We can ignore that and explain it away as the natural course of things or credit ourselves with our learning and discovery - or we can acknowledge the power and presence of the Creator and Sustainer guiding history, leading discovery, and shaping the course of our own lives. God is very much involved in what we call "ordinary" or "explainable" or "logical" parts of our world and experience (after all, He created it all).

Sometimes, as in Acts 2, God does come in extraordinary ways - we experience miracles of wisdom, inspiration, guidance, healing, miracles, etc. These are wonderful demonstrations of God's power, but no more so than His hand in the taken-for-granted things in our world.

It starts with God, but ...

It all starts with God, but it continues in my life and yours. The Spirit speaks, but I have to listen ("*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*"). The Spirit speaks, I have to listen, and I have to choose to act on what I hear. We are called to a partnership with God. Not that we are equal partners - we will always depend upon God for help - but rather that God chooses to wait for us, work with us, and through us to see His kingdom come and His will be done in our lives, and on earth as it is in heaven. God does not force Himself upon any of us. Rather, He invites us to join

Him in His mission to bring hope, healing, joy, peace, and love into the world - but our response is always by our own free choice. And the degree of response is our choice.

- I can believe in Jesus and that Christians should live their faith, share their faith, and serve God in the world.
- I can believe in Jesus and that Christians should live their faith, share their faith, and serve God in the world. *And I can say that to other people.*
- I can believe in Jesus and that Christians should live their faith, share their faith, and serve God in the world. *And I can say that to other people. And I can try to live as Jesus would have me live.*
- I can believe in Jesus and that Christians should live their faith, share their faith, and serve God in the world. *And I can say that to other people. And I can try to live as Jesus would have me live. And I can actively seek to bring God's peace, love, and hope.*

We are invited to a "God-conscious way of life" which means consciously allowing our partnership with God to permeate every aspect of our existence, being attentive to God's voice speaking through the day. *"God-consciousness encourages us to live with more mystery than mastery, to embrace paradox and our own finitude, to realize that we are not "god" but that we can depend on someone Other than ourselves. And it also encourages us to cherish our own selves as of infinite worth and dignity - not earned but a gift. Our very being alive gives glory to God."*¹

A solid foundation

The most important part of any building is its foundation. A beautiful building, built on an insecure foundation, won't last (without radical retrofitting, anyway, like the Tower of Pisa). But even the most humble building, built on a solid foundation, will endure.

Our spirit/soul is the foundation of our lives. That inner core of our being - that part of us who tells us who we are, tells us how to live, shapes our opinions, beliefs, actions, and choices - is the base upon which we build everything else in our lives. Our careers are based on our beliefs about who we are, what is worth working for, and what we want to achieve in life. Our relationships are shaped by our convictions about honesty, commitment, parenthood, marriage, and family. Our lifestyle is crafted by our understandings about what is and isn't important, what is or isn't ethical, and what impact we want to have (or not) on the world around us, etc.

I saw once a sign: *"Most people's minds are like concrete: a little bit of everything, thoroughly mixed together."* A foundation made from a pot pourri of different materials is a difficult one on which to build. It's a bit like trying to take bits and pieces from several car manufacturers and get it all to function together. It might run (sort to) - but it won't work well.

The invitation of the Holy Spirit to each of us is establish a coherent, cohesive foundation that integrates all the bits and pieces for our lives, helping us to live a whole and balanced life. God's

¹ Thomas Groome, *Educating for Life*, p. 330.

invitation is to make Himself the centre of our lives so that everything we are and all we do flows naturally from that centre. Then we have ...

- **A coherent way to understand the world and ourselves**

"This is our Father's world ..." the Creation around us is His handiwork. The sky is blue because the chemical composition of the atmosphere scatters light in the blue wavelengths - because God create it that way. Flickers, robins, sparrow, blue jays, waxwings, nuthatches, chickadees and all the other birds are so varied and unique - because God created them that way. Therefore I walk through this world as God's art gallery, I treat it with honour and respect.

I know I - and every other person - is a child of God, created by Him and for His glory. I honour other people as God's children, fellow family members. I respect myself, as God's creation.

- **A sense of purpose**

The two greatest commands, Jesus says, are to love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength AND to love my neighbour as myself. Those only sound easy. My purpose is to live my life in such a way that God is glorified by how I live and what I do. And my purpose is to live in community with other people - living the values of Jesus: integrity, honesty, compassion, justice, honouring other people, caring for those in need. In a word "love" - the kind of love God shows to me, I am called to share with others. Out of this love for God, I can live with a consistent framework for responsibility and ethics.

When I don't live this way - when I try to just include God as one of the many ingredients in my foundation, life does not go well. I find myself torn between competing values systems. I struggle to find meaning and purpose. I get disillusioned with my faith. If you are finding following Jesus a bit of a miserable, confusing, annoying thing - it may be because you're trying to just add Jesus as stucco on the outside of your life, rather than the foundation.

"Christian spirituality is consciously living one's life in relationship with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit and following 'the way' of Jesus, the Christ. Allured by God's desire within human hearts, the Christian spiritual journey is into right relationship with God, self, others, and creation, permeated by justice and compassion. It is sustained by prayer - personal and communal - and lived through a Christian community for the coming of God's reign in the world"²
What a great kind of life to lead! It's a whole, holistic way of life. Will I consciously live my life in relationship with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit and following 'the way' of Jesus?

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² *Educating for Life*, p. 340.