

I Believe in the Holy Spirit

This is one of my favourite stories in the Gospels. It happens on the first day of the week, Easter Day, in the upper room. The disciples have gathered, the doors are locked. The risen Jesus came and stood among his disciples, and said,

'Peace be with you.'

After this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, so I send you.'

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'

Sometimes God can feel distant and far away, and the truths about God can seem so big and hard to take hold of. Sometimes our hearts can feel as cold and hard as stone towards God and towards other people. Those are the moments we need to remember this story in particular, and those are the times we need to say, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit.'

Welcome to the fourth in this series of short films telling the great story of the Christian faith as told in the Apostles' Creed. I'm Steven, the Bishop of Oxford. Thank you again for joining us on this journey.

The words of the Creed are the words we use when Christians come to be baptised. These are the words we use as well, Sunday by Sunday, when we come together, sometimes worn out or shaken or dried out by living out our faith in the world. And three times in the Creed we say these powerful words: I believe. We're naming the core truths of our faith.

First, we place our trust again in God, the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth.

Next, we place our trust in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord, in his death and resurrection.

And then comes the third great moment of trust.

We say together, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit.'

God comes to live in us, to give us strength, to change us from the inside out, to bring us comfort and peace and joy, and to lead us into truth. Christians believe amazing things, and this is one of the most amazing truths of all. God's spirit, God's presence, God's very self comes and makes his home in us forever. The story of the Holy Spirit is woven through the Bible. The Holy Spirit is active in the creation of the world, brooding over the chaos in the first chapter of Genesis. God gives the Holy Spirit a particular special people through the story of the Old Testament, to prophets and priests and kings, to builders and weavers, to those who wrote the scriptures.

But the same scriptures tell of a time when God will pour out the Holy Spirit, not on a few people, but on everybody - women and men, young and old. In the fullness of time, the Holy Spirit comes to Mary as she conceives Jesus, God's own son. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism in a new way to assure Jesus of God's love and to give him strength and power for his ministry. And Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to everyone who follows him. The Holy Spirit is God, as the father is God, and the son is God. Three persons in an eternal relationship of love. Christians believe that God is Trinity - the father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is how God has been revealed to us in the scriptures and in Jesus. We experience God so powerfully in creation, in Jesus Christ and in God's presence in our lives, the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is the Christian way of putting into words the truth which words can never really hold. God's greatness and wonder is beyond our human reason and logic.

How can they not be?

But we can know and experience the wonder of God's love ourselves, as Father, as the Son and as the Holy Spirit. And this is what makes this story at the end of John's gospel so powerful. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to each of his disciples with just a soft breath on the forehead. God comes to dwell in our hearts through faith as we say, 'I believe.' Nothing will ever be the same again.

How do we experience the Holy Spirit's work in our lives? The Bible uses lots of beautiful images of fire and wind and water for the Spirit's work. First, the Holy Spirit is God's living presence within us, our friend. John's Gospel calls the Holy Spirit the comforter, the living water who quenches our deep inner thirst for God - the fire of love burning within us, the presence of God as deep as our own breath. We know we're never alone. We can never be separated from the love of God by anything in the whole of creation.

Second, the Holy Spirit enters our lives to work within us and to change us. God doesn't leave us as we are. Our hearts of stone become hearts of flesh again. Our conscience is made more alive, both to the wrong we do and the good we do not do. Our habits begin to change. The spirit gives us the power to become slowly more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient and kind. The spirit guides us.

And third, the Holy Spirit gives us wonderful gifts of ministry and service. In the upper room, Jesus says to the disciples as he breathes on them, 'As the father has sent me, so I send you.' God has a mission for you, a calling for your life. As your loving father, God gives you all the resources you need for that mission - the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The same spirit gives different gifts to different members of Christ's body, the Church, all are of equal value, and it's for everyone to discover the gifts that the spirit will give to you, and to use those gifts in God's service.

Christians believe amazing things, and one of the most profound and wonderful truths we hold is this: that Almighty God, the maker of heaven and Earth, gifts to us the gift of the Holy Spirit, who comes to live in us to make us more like Jesus, and to equip us for God's service.

And that's why we say together:

'I believe in the Holy Spirit.'

May God bless you on this next part of the journey.