

Sermon at St John the Evangelist, Cambridge on 23rd July 2017

3 Sundays, in the midst of summer (of which today is the 2nd), with a common focus on one of the most profound texts in all Christian literature: Romans Chapter 8. And three Sundays, also, with parables of Jesus about seed planting, and words from the OT about the awesomeness of God... A veritable feast at the heart of summer and our season of Ordinary time, in which to step back and breathe more deeply; putting down deep roots into the soil and drawing from the depths of God's Spirit.

Such is the importance of Paul's Letter to the Romans that it has been described as the 5th Gospel (after Matthew, Mark, Luke & John); and in this context, Romans 8 stands at a pivotal point in that whole Letter, addressing, in particular, a key question. And it's that question that I want to reflect on this morning: what does it mean to live life 'in the Spirit'.

It was warm and captivating, and the atmosphere was remarkable, as I sat in a tent (albeit a bit uncomfortably) - in the middle of a field in France, in summer, on a day just like today. I was at Taizé, on a youth pilgrimage from the Diocese of Leicester, sitting in one of the great worship tents: listening to one of the Brothers talk in depth about Romans 8. And it suddenly hit me (as we worked through the Letter in a sustained way - and afterwards talked about it, together, in small groups) that here was a message that, if true, was profoundly life-changing, with radical implications not only for our faith, but for daily life back home. So let's here, again, some of those words of St Paul, at the heart of Romans 8, which landed - in my lap - like an unexploded mine, as I sat in that field in France, some 15 years ago:-

'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption - when we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...'

So what does this mean? I want you to think, for a moment, of a time when you felt completely, entirely, utterly accepted and loved; when you knew that you truly belonged; when you dared to believe that what you needed most (as far as was practically possible) would be met? When you felt no fear or loneliness, but only love and communion - a sense of wellbeing and right relationship with those around you; whether that was your parents, your family or your closest friends.

Well I think it's perhaps only when we begin to think in those terms - whether that's been part of our recent experience or not - that **we begin to glimpse the kind of transformed relationship** with God of which St Paul speaks. 'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.'

In other words, for those who belong to God through Baptism (& renewed daily by prayer and the sacraments), **the Spirit of God really does dwell in our hearts** - whether we realise it or not. For this is the gift of Christ for everyone. And if we stop to think about it, and dare to believe it, the implications are utterly life-changing: for, yes, living in the Spirit really does mean that God dwells within us, that we are children of God - adopted into his family - and therefore able to talk to God with the most profound intimacy: Abba! Father! And,

above all, we discover that we are completely, entirely and utterly accepted and loved.

'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.' Yes, you & I & all those who dare to respond to God, are led by Him and filled by his Spirit, we are all his children, heirs to all that God promises and longs to give us.

The same message, of course, that comes to us from two other seminal texts on 'life in the Spirit', in the New Testament: Galatians 4 (which affirms that 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts') and Luke 11, in which Jesus first unfolds the meaning of Christian prayer, out of this profound new relationship with God, which he makes possible: 'Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed by your name, Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

In other words it's only as it gradually dawns on us, in the risky business of faith, that **God really does love us, and his Spirit dwells within us**, that we begin to entrust everything to Him, daring to dream of that new world (God's Kingdom) that he longs to bring about. And discovering, as we dare to dream and to walk in this light, that it really works.

So 'Living in the Spirit' is about so much more than simply coming to Church or knowing the right things, it's about daring to live out of a deep inner relationship with God, who loves us. Living in the Spirit is about a whole new relationship with God, who dwells within us and empowers us to experience God and talk to God, in a radically different way. A life-giving way (a new way of being human) which, if we dare to believe - like young children, with an attitude of complete trust - to be really true, changes everything.

The problem is, of course, that we live in a time poor society and a world of broken relationships, in which it can be so difficult to believe that God really does love us, and adopts us into his family. We live at a time and in a place where families are under acute strain and many are left behind by so-called economic progress. So many are lonely, and feel that they don't belong; that they're not truly loved. And this can lead to all kinds of things filling the spiritual void.

For **we all need to know and to discover that we are truly loved**: by God, and by other people. And this is why it's so vital for us - as a local Christian community - to continue to build and model a radically loving, accepting and welcoming space to belong, in order to enable each other to discover that God really does love us too. And perhaps this is why the Christian Church first came into being, not just to proclaim the Gospel, but to model the kind of loving community that was necessary for us to dare to discover that, yes, contrary to all the evidence, God really does love us; his Spirit dwells within us; we are part of his extended family.

'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God and fellow heirs with Christ.'

You & I, who are led by the Spirit of God, are his children, we belong to him and to one another, we are part of Christ, we are his children, heirs of his Spirit of love and joy and peace; invited to pray, to live out of a deeply intimate relationship with him, to talk to him and bring our needs to him; and entrusted with the joyful commission of building his church, his kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven, and bearing the good fruits of his Spirit.

Let me end with a short story – which will be known to some of you – which illustrates exactly what St Paul is talking about in Romans 8 about life in the Spirit... that profound truth that hit home to me, as I sat in a field in France, one summer, all those year ago.

Little Nutbrown Hare, who was going to bed, held on tight to Big Nutbrown Hare's very long ears. He wanted to be sure that Big Nutbrown Hare was listening.

"Guess how much I love you," he said.

"Oh, I don't think I could guess that," said Big Nutbrown Hare.

"This much," said Little Nutbrown Hare, stretching out his arms as wide as they could go.

Big Nutbrown Hare had even longer arms. "But I love YOU this much," he said.

Hmm, that is a lot, thought Little Nutbrown Hare.

"I love you as high as I can reach." said Little Nutbrown Hare.

"I love you as high as I can reach," said Big Nutbrown Hare.

That is quite high, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. I wish I had arms like that.

Then Little Nutbrown Hare had a good idea. He tumbled upside down and reached up the tree trunk with his feet.

"I love you all the way up to my toes!" he said.

"And I love you all the way up to your toes," said Big Nutbrown Hare, swinging him up over his head...

That's quite far, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. He was almost too sleepy to think any more. Then he looked beyond the thorn bushes, out into the big dark night. Nothing could be further than the sky.

"I love you right up to the MOON," he said, and closed his eyes.

"Oh, that's far," said Big Nutbrown Hare. "That is very, very far."

Big Nutbrown Hare settled Little Nutbrown Hare into his bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him good night.

Then he lay down close by and whispered with a smile, "I love you right up to the moon - AND BACK."

... which gives us just the tiniest glimpse of just how much God loves each one of us. *Amen*