

Romans 8: 9. The Spirit of God dwells in you

The Archbishop of Canterbury was visiting a Church of England school and the head teacher was keen to show of the quality of religious education in the school. She told the Archbishop that each class each day recited The Apostles' Creed: and invited the guest to observe as one class recited it line about, pupil by pupil. So pupil 1 began *I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth*; it was picked up by pupil 2 with *And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord*; and so on all around the class line by line until....Silence! Silence, embarrassment. Until one voice piped up. "Please miss, the boy who believes in the Holy Spirit is absent today"!

Well, we heard earlier this morning from the boy who believes in the Holy Spirit. The few verses we read from Paul's Letter to the Romans are quite difficult, and we will try to get a little way inside them this morning. But one thing is clear from them St. Paul believes in the Holy Spirit. Indeed, within a few verses he becomes quite excited on the subject, and in his excitement uses different names. He talks about "the Spirit", "the Spirit of God" "the Spirit of Christ" and even "Christ"; and as far as I can tell he means the same with each term.

And here is what he says about the Spirit. The Spirit of God is dwelling in you. Will you live according to the Spirit of God, or will you turn your back on the Spirit of God? The spirit of God is dwelling in you. He is saying this to a group of people he has never met. He is hundreds of miles away, he has never been in Rome, but he is very confident when he says *The Spirit of God is dwelling in you*. The one who wrote Romans is definitely the boy who believes in the Holy Spirit.

You would think it was against the evidence. They were a tiny number. There had only been Christians in Rome for about ten years when Paul wrote this letter, and even after ten years of doing their best they probably numbered no more than five households. So they had not been growing. But Paul confidently says *The Spirit of God is dwelling in you*. Moreover it was no fun being a Christian in first-century Rome. It would be another ten years before Nero's terrible persecution began but their safety of the Christians was very fragile in Rome: statues of the pagan gods on every corner, the cruelty of the state's opposition to anyone who refused to worship the Emperor seen week after week, the might of Rome so powerful that any claim the Jesus is Lord must have seemed to the Christians themselves often little more than a vain hope. But the boy who believes in the Holy Spirit writes to them *The Spirit of God is dwelling in you*.

It must have sounded as unlikely to those who first read the letter as it would if some crank came to a pulpit in Edinburgh in our time and said *The Spirit of God is dwelling in you*. St Paul had been your preacher this morning and he had come away with that line would you not have cried out "Come off it!" The Holy spirit in us? Don't you know that our church is in accelerated decline? Some people were reminding me on Friday night that there used to be five Church of Scotland congregations in Morningside and we are all that is left. What's more, our world shows precious little sign of the mercy of God. Syria, domestic abuse, Alzheimer's Disease. And if all this is not enough most of us aren't up to much ourselves in the way of spiritual purity. And St Paul would listen to all that, and he would think, and then he would say ... you know what he would say. He would say *I hear all that, and I still say The Spirit of God is dwelling in you*. In Edinburgh. In 2017. And it sounds just as unlikely now as it did in Rome in 57 AD.

To the sceptics then and now he might talk about baptism: how in the day of your baptism God made a promise to you that you would never walk through the world alone. Or he might talk about the communion table and the body of Christ broken for you and put into your hands to eat and drink. *The Spirit of God is dwelling in you.* He might ask you if the alarm bell of conscience has ever kept you safe from doing wrong. Or he might talk to you about love, and quote something that he wrote to the Corinthian Christians only four or five years before he wrote *Romans Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* Or he might say *Look around you and look for signs of life.* Life is growing and gaining strength all around you even in the face of the power of death. The spirit of God is the spirit of life.

To help you see what I am getting at, St Paul might say, let me tell you where your locum minister will be tomorrow. Tomorrow he will be conducting a funeral: but this is no ordinary funeral. Robert was born with a severe form of muscular dystrophy, and has lived his 31 years with increasing disability and weakness. But he lived these 31 years. The spirit of life was all around. No longer able to walk, and only speaking with great difficulty, he gained an honours degree in computer science. No longer able to walk and speaking with great difficulty he campaigned tirelessly and appeared on television before a Holyrood Select Committee on the matter of holiday provision for himself and his comrades. Robert spent the last eight months of his life in a high-dependency ward and his mother and father were there holding his hand all day every day. The hospital care was wonderful. It sounds a terrible story and it is; and Robert died last week. But he died a hero. And you could not visit him, talking about his impending death, and not see and feel and know that the spirit of life was all around. Of course there will be tears tomorrow: but there will also be great celebration of the spirit of life.

Or let me tell you another story, St Paul might say. A story very relevant for this time of year. It is a story that those first Christians in Rome would know; and a story known to these latter-day Christians in Edinburgh. It is the story of Jesus. Betrayed, handed over to sinful men, his body broken on a cross, he dies. They thrust a spear into his side to make sure that he is dead. He is dead all over. On the third day, a woman is weeping in a garden for the loss of her Master. She sees a figure in front of her, and in her sobbing he says her name "Mary". It is Easter Day. Jesus, once dead all over, is dead no more. Christ is risen. It is the triumph of the spirit of life.

One of the greatest of the old Scottish paraphrases comes from the very same chapter of Romans we have been thinking about  
*The Saviour died, but rose again, Triumphant from the grave  
And pleads our cause at God's right hand, omnipotent to save  
Each future period that will bless, as it has blest the past  
He loved us from the first of time, he loves us to the last.*  
That, above all, is what gives St Paul the absurd confidence to say to them long, long ago, and to us today *The Spirit of God is dwelling in you.*

A thousand years after St Paul, a monk is near the end of his days. His name is Godric, and he is a character in a book. He said as an old, old man who had lost almost everything, "What's lost is nothing to what's found, and all the death that ever was set next to life would scarcely fill a cup."

Amen