

John 20:19-23

The Spirit Gives Life

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the many things that I miss in our current situation is to stand in your presence and proclaim God's peace and forgiveness to you in Jesus' name. This is a special privilege that I get as your pastor. To actually declare that the sins you have confessed are forgiven. And to know that because of what God has promised in scripture, it happens right there and then. And all this is because the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the church. The Spirit is at work in the Word of God, so that the Word does what it says. And in that way, the Holy Spirit is the life-blood of the church. Everything that God's Word says is true for his church, is made true in his church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today I want to focus, not on the general outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost for the sake of the spread of the gospel, but on the very specific giving of the Holy Spirit in John chapter 20. Here, Jesus gives the Spirit to the Apostles by breathing on them and saying:

Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

In John's gospel, this is a weighty and highly anticipated scene. Right back in chapter one, John the Baptist introduces Jesus as 'the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit' (John 1:33). Jesus himself has said that his ability to give the Holy Spirit 'without measure' would offer proof that he is from God and speaks the words of God (John 3:34). He promised that 'rivers of living water' would flow from his innermost being, and this is undoubtedly a reference to the giving of the Spirit (John 7:38-39). And, of course, Jesus has had much to say about the coming 'Advocate', or 'Helper'.

Which makes it rather surprising that this event doesn't seem to achieve much at the time. Nothing spectacular happened directly afterwards. Indeed, we know that the apostles went fishing in the week after the resurrected Jesus first appeared to them in the upper room.

So what did happen when Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit? We can see a parallel with the creation account when Adam was given life through the breath of God (Genesis 2:7). The first man had been formed from the dust of the ground, and when the Lord God breathed into him the breath of life, he became a 'living soul'. Jesus picked up fallen dust from the ground of Israel, a group of nobodies, and shaped them for three years, and now he breathed life into them.

What the Lord God did in the Old Testament to create humanity, the resurrected and glorified Jesus does to create a new humanity, which has new life by Jesus' own breath. This group gathered in the upper room is the start of that new humanity, that new community. We will see later on the day of Pentecost that it will include people from every nation. But here, as Jesus imparts the Spirit of the apostles, we see the foundation is being built. Its basis is the forgiveness of sins. This is what Jesus achieved on the cross when he breathed his last, and this is what the Spirit is empowering them to do as Jesus breathes on them. The connection back to the cross is key.

This group of apostles is gathered and empowered as the foundation for this new creation, only because they were the chosen witnesses the events of the crucifixion. That is what the Spirit is empowering them to proclaim. As St Paul says in First Corinthians chapter one, we preach Christ crucified. This is the foundation of the church that is being built by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We see in a few other places on John's gospel how this happens. We see why the Spirit is necessary for the building of the church. For example, it is "the Spirit of truth," who dwells with believers forever yet cannot be received by "the world" (John 14:16-17). It is the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, who will teach Jesus' followers everything and remind them of all he told them (John 14:26; 16:13). It is the Spirit, whom Jesus sends "from the Father," and who testifies about Jesus and equips people to offer testimony about him (John 15:26-27). It is the Spirit who glorifies Jesus (John 16:14). It is the Spirit who can "prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8-11).

Again from First Corinthians, St Paul tells us that the Spirit gives to the church, to the body of Christ, for its common good.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:4–7 (ESV)

The Spirit is given for the sake of the church. It brings us the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross, and builds us up as the body of Christ. So when Jesus breathed out the Spirit upon the apostles, it wasn't to give them new spiritual experiences, though they would have plenty. Nor was it to set them apart from ordinary people, as some sort of super spirit-filled group. The point is so that they can do, in and for the whole world, what Jesus had been doing in Israel. 'As the father has sent me, so I'm sending you', Jesus said.

Jesus' mission to Israel, reaching its climax in his death and resurrection, is to be continued through his disciples, through his church, to the whole world. That's why they need the Holy Spirit to enable them to do the job they could otherwise never dream of doing. They are to pronounce, in God's name and by his Spirit, the message of forgiveness to all who believe in Jesus. They are also to 'retain sins', to warn the world that sin is a serious, deadly disease, and that to remain in it will bring death. They are to rebuke and warn—not because they don't like people, or because they are seeking power or prestige for themselves, but because this is God's message to a muddled, confused, and still rebellious world.

And it's only by the power of the Holy Spirit that accompanies this rebuke and warning, that people are convicted of sin, that hearts are softened, and that sinful humans are returned to God. We are, in and of ourselves, are incapable of living up to what God desires. Not even the best encouragement and advice can get us there. But the Holy Spirit makes it possible for the disciples, and for all of us, to be who Jesus wants us to be. Because the Spirit is at work in you, in you as individuals, and in you as the church, the forgiveness you give and receive is real forgiveness, real God-given forgiveness.

This is the only way it works. The Word of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, does its work in you. You that were once dead in sin and now alive in Christ Jesus. You have been given life again by the power of the Holy Spirit. And as we return again and again to hear God's Word, we are renewed by the Spirit of life. Sins confessed are forgiven. The church is empowered once more to go and grow. To proclaim Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. To bring new life, to bring the new creation, that is founded on Christ Jesus the cornerstone, and has life only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, on this Pentecost Sunday, as we still cannot gather for public worship, I pray that the Holy Spirit is still at work in your life. May you hear God's words of warning and correction. May you know the forgiveness that Jesus won for you on the cross. And may you, empowered by the Holy Spirit, join the church throughout all time and place in proclaiming Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. To God be all glory. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.