

Rich Inheritance

Session 4:

CD Track 133

A POWER

The Spirit of God is a thread that runs right through the Bible – Old and New Testaments. But is it the same Spirit all the way through? Is there any big change when we start to talk about the Holy Spirit? I asked Paula Gooder to do a quick biblical rundown on the Holy Spirit. And she begins with St Paul.

PG: Paul, for example, in the space of three verses in Romans 8, can talk about the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ and *our* Spirit, slipping between those three as though there isn't anything surprising that he's doing. What he seems to be talking about is the fact that *he* understands 'Spirit' to be something about the essential *essence* of God, something about the essential *essence* of Christ, something about the essential *essence* of us, which all meet together in prayer. And that's the very interesting thing – is that you begin to encounter the Holy Spirit *most*, through the spiritual life of prayer. And so actually I think you do have quite a close connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament, through that use of 'Spirit' as being the inner being of God – the essence of who God is. But that slowly, over the New Testament period, you find that moving into a much clearer, separate designation of what we would now understand to be the third person of the Trinity.

134 *So let's concentrate on the Holy Spirit of the New Testament. Various characteristics are attributed to the Holy Spirit: wind, fire, unity, harmony, comforter and so on. I asked our contributors if there is any real consensus on what the Holy Spirit is like in Christian thinking. Paula again, and then Jim Wallis – but first, Archbishop Vincent.*

VN: I would hope not [laughs]. I think the Holy Spirit is precisely that elusive, powerful, all-pervasive presence of God which nobody's ever managed to tie down. You know, there is a principle in Catholic theology that says: of course we look to the Sacraments of the Church as the place where the Holy Spirit certainly is at work, but the principle is, that power of God's Holy Spirit is poured out on all creation. And it is a wind that blows where it will – and then we're into the poetic imagery, because we can't cope with that gratuitous grandeur of God in any other way.

PG: If there is any one thing you can say about the Holy Spirit it is that the Holy Spirit is impossible to tie down. The Holy Spirit is that which communicates God to us. And because the being of God is *so* great and so incomprehensible, it is hardly surprising that there are many, many different descriptions of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is almost impossible to find a consensus, other than that the Holy Spirit communicates the essence of God to us.

JW: When Jesus left, he said: I am leaving but I am giving you the power of the Spirit. I'm going to give you power that will animate you and give you courage and help you to follow me in the ways I've talked about.

135 *Among the many roles attributed to the Holy Spirit is that of comforter. I wondered if this was about being comforted – or being comfortable.*

VN: I think in my experience I would put all my money on 'comforted' rather than 'comfortable'. And I think once we're getting comfortable it's probably precisely the time when something is going to come along, depending on our position in life, which is going to rock the boat. And for the most part I would ask myself and others to try and sense what God is telling me in this rocking of the boat. And, as I think Pope John

XXIII used to say after he'd been elected Pope, he said he found it very difficult to sleep at first, but then he began to say to himself: well, look Lord, it's your Church, not mine. I'm going to sleep now, it's up to you from now on [laughing]. And that was *comfort* – he didn't become *comfortable*, but he then gained a serenity that everybody knows him for.

PG: If you trace the uses of the word 'comfort' through the Hebrew text in the Old Testament, the word 'comfort' often means 'to change'. So when it talks about God 'comforting the wilderness' what it means is he changes it from being a desert place into being an oasis. And so therefore I would say that the problem is our English word 'comfort' – which communicates too much of the sitting down passively and not doing very much. For me 'comforting', if you take its Hebrew roots, is about being open to the change of God. Sometimes that's nice. And sometimes that's less nice.

136 *What about the Holy Spirit as the bringer of unity and harmony? Why is this so long in coming to the Church?*

VN: Well, because we're so obstinate and we're so limited in our capacity to see. And often attached to our securities and to the things that we sincerely and genuinely believe are our foundations. And I think, in terms of the work for Christian unity, I'm always left returning to an insistence that Cardinal Hume had, which was that we will only receive the gift of unity on our knees. We will not *talk* our way into it – we'll certainly never *negotiate* our way into it. It will eventually, in God's time, fundamentally be a gift that we receive when we're on our knees.

PG: I think the Holy Spirit has an uphill task, doesn't it, in trying to bring unity and harmony among human beings. The other thing I would like to

say is that that whole concept of unity would be very closely allied to the Hebrew word *Shalom*, which is that idea of completeness and peace and harmony – those two words 'unity' and 'harmony' are brought together in the Hebrew word *Shalom*. And it's very clear that *Shalom* will happen when the end times come. And so, at that moment, we will experience pure unity and harmony. Until that moment, we will be labouring up the cliff face – sometimes getting there, most often not getting there. *But* – it will come.

JW: I don't think we're ever going to come together around agreeing on doctrine and polity and different views of the Eucharist, or whatever. But I do think that we can come together around the big issues, the moral issues – don't go left, don't go right, go deeper. What are the moral issues right beneath the political debate? And those issues can unite us.

137 *And Jim selects a useful example from history.*

JW: William Wilberforce is a hero to many of us and he came right out of a Wesleyan revival, you know – here's this young lawmaker, young politician, Barack Obama type if you will – and he has a conversion, and he gives his whole life to ending the slave trade. And, of course, when he began this he was regarded as a joke, it was comical – who would ever think of a nation giving up, giving up the slave trade? And if we do, the French will just take it over and be more powerful than we – and all the rest. And it took 30 years to end the slave trade, and then finally slavery. And Wilberforce died 3 days later, and I guess his work was done. The movie now, *Amazing Grace*, talks about that, but the movie doesn't quite cover the power of the, the prairie fire, if you will, of this movement. It talked about the man and that was a good thing. But it was a