

Week 3

The Holy Spirit

Sanctification Seen Through the Eyes of St Richard of Chichester

**And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
The Lord, the giver of life.
Who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified**

*Begin the session with a period of **quiet reflection and/or prayer**.*

A Bible Reading

John 16. 1-15; Romans 8. 1-27

Reflection by Dr Dan Inman

Associate Vicar of St Luke's and Christ Church, Chelsea



An audio version of this reflection is available in the Lent 2025 section of the Diocesan Website:

We can often feel that 'holiness' is something that other people do. We might expect it of our clergy, of monks and nuns, or our spiritual directors. Yet holiness or being made holy (for which the theological word is 'sanctification'), is the activity of the Holy Spirit within

each one of us; it is not something earned or notched up on a piety scorecard, but the free gift of God to us in our baptism and throughout our lives.

Just as the Spirit was instrumental in bringing us to life at creation (Genesis 1.2; 2.7) as it hovered over the waters and as God breathed into Adam, so Jesus breathes on his disciples, saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20.22, cf. also John 6.63; 2 Corinthians 3.6): the Spirit makes us a new creation in Jesus Christ. The Spirit also enables us to believe ('No one can say 'Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12.3)') and to enter into relationship with God in Jesus Christ, helping us to pray (Romans 8.26-27) and bringing us into that communion of love that shapes the conversation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All of this underlines to us that our holiness does not depend on our human ability, or having done an MA in Spirituality, but upon the grace and activity of the Holy Spirit.

All of this might be something of a relief if we've been inclined to see Church as akin to a never-ending spiritual Olympics in which we invariably feel as successful as the British bobsleigh team. Our freedom as God's children is the fruit of Christ's death on the Cross and his Spirit burning within us; nothing can take this away from us, even when we monumentally fail.

Conversely, however, we might also be inclined – as indeed did many of the early Christians – to think that the freedom we discover in the Spirit means sitting light to what often feels like the constraining activity of the Church. We can hear St Paul struggling with those in Corinth, for example, for whom life in the Spirit seemed to be resulting in unfettered ecstatic worship, a prioritising of certain spectacular spiritual gifts over others or, as among the Galatians, a sense that freedom from the Law of Moses meant an opportunity for self-indulgence (Gal 5.13).

The ecstatic can be alluring and it is in each age of the Church's life. Yet the Church does not exist as a kind of perpetual spiritual Glastonbury; the fiery new life of Pentecost is not inimical to what might feel like the humdrum of everyday parish life or even the pattern of ecclesiastical order and hierarchy. Both Scripture and church history should caution us when we're so tempted to leap off into what feels like the spiritual deep-end without regard for the good order of the household of faith.

Note, for example, that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is preceded by the prayerful discernment as to who should replace Judas (Acts 1.24) and, in the heady days that followed, the work of the Spirit is facilitated by the careful selection of deacons upon whom hands are laid (Acts 6.6).

Such concern for good order as foundational to the missional work of the Holy Spirit was at the heart of our own Diocese's renewal in the thirteenth century during the tenure of St Richard of Wych as the bishop of Chichester (1245-52). This was a time, not unlike our own, in which society was rapidly changing with the growth of urban life.

There were tense relations between Church and state, and the rapid spread of new ideas across a fractious Europe was leaving many people distracted, confused and tempted to join schismatic movements. Even Richard's appointment as Bishop of Chichester was a tense negotiation between the Pope and Henry III which left Richard himself dislocated from the palace in Chichester, unable to access the resources of the see, and effectively homeless within his own diocese.

For many others, such privations might have been a cause for considerable anxiety or distress. But Richard had been formed in such a way to be well equipped for this rather chaotic existence. When he was training for the priesthood in Orleans, he had been deeply imbued with the principles of St Dominic and his new Order of Preachers whose influence was sweeping across Europe. Unlike the older religious orders, notably the Benedictines, the Dominican life was, by its very nature, itinerant, embedded in the life of growing towns and cities, and – above all - nurtured by ordered disciplines of study and contemplation.

This life of travelling, relying on the kindness of others, speaking of Christ on the hoof and nurtured by assiduous reading and contemplation was not, for St Richard, a barrier to the development of holiness but its animation. Like the apostles driven out of the upper room at Pentecost or indeed Jesus's departure into the wilderness following his baptism, the Spirit drives us out!

While there is of course much to be said for that devotion and spiritual development that comes from closing the door of one's room and seeking the Father in secret (Matthew 6.6), the New Testament also bears witness to the remarkable formation in holiness that comes from being driven out of our comfort zone into the unknown, speaking a new word to those we do not know, and discovering the Spirit going before us. I think this was probably true for St Richard who, animated by the missionary zeal of the Dominicans, encountered the work of the Holy Spirit and was himself strengthened by him in his poverty and homelessness, discovering - as St Paul had - God's power in his own vulnerability (1 Cor 12.9).

What did the people of Sussex encounter in St Richard? Miracles are attributed to St Richard certainly (most famously, his chalice that, knocked over, was said not to have spilt the Precious Blood). But I think his holiness found its expression in the more everyday: in his own commitment to poverty, his considerable generosity in almsgiving, and his avoidance of haughtiness. This had marked him out even in his student days at Oxford where his commitment to poverty, spiritual discipline and learning was noted by Edmund Rich (later, the archbishop of Canterbury) and indeed led to his appointment in due course as Chancellor of Oxford.

We perhaps tend now not to think of scholarship as a means of holiness and, indeed, most governments now think it merely a means of acquiring skills for the workplace. But successive spiritual writers down the ages have underlined how a commitment to learning can shape a deeper awareness. I think of the French philosopher Simone Weil, who wrote an essay in 1942 entitled 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies'. She noted in this essay the great effort that is required to concentrate in the course of school education and to keep our focus on one thing in particular – something which in our age of distraction is even more difficult.

But Weil said that the energy we devote to attention of this kind should help us afterwards to devote our attention to our neighbour, and especially to those who are in need. She writes, "The useless efforts made by the Curé d'Ars (St John Mary Vianney), for long and painful years, in his attempt to learn Latin bore fruit in the wonderful discernment which enabled him to see the very soul of his penitents behind their words and even their silences." ('Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies', in *Waiting on God*, 68-9).

It is this kind of attentiveness, for the movement of the Spirit beneath the surface, which I think Richard of Wych had nurtured in his own discipline of study and which helped him to discern the Spirit in those around him. This is not study as a means to qualifications or skills but study as an aid to the discernment of the Holy Spirit – something he no doubt had admired among the Dominicans in their pattern of contemplation and study and which, as with the Curé d'Ars, shaped his own encounters with his own clergy and people of Sussex.

As we too live in a restless and distracted age, easily seduced by the fantastical and the immediate, our own quest for holiness might – in this anniversary year of our diocese – do worse than look again at the example of St Richard.

How do we encounter the Holy Spirit?

Might we learn to discover the Spirit as we step out of our comfort zone? Are there ways in which we can be more courageous, generous, and discover in our own poverty (an increasing problem of the Church of England!), God's strength afresh? Moreover, are we watchful for the signs of the Holy Spirit's recreative power in our midst ('The wind blows wherever it chooses' - John 3.8) and what might disciplined reading look like for us? May the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth (John 16.13)!

Podcast

A short podcast of Bishop Martin in conversation with others will be available on the Diocesan Website from Ash Wednesday.

This may help your individual reflection or group discussion on this theme.

It will be available on the Diocesan Website a week before Ash Wednesday.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- What do you think of the view that the Spirit is the ultimate source of our own holiness, and is this something you have thought about before?
- Following the example of St Richard is a challenge to all. Might we learn to discover the Spirit as we step out of our comfort zone?
- Are there ways in which we can be more courageous, generous, and discover in our own poverty God's strength afresh?
- Are we watchful for the signs of the Holy Spirit's recreative power in our midst ('The wind blows wherever it chooses' - John 3.8) and what might disciplined reading look like for us?

A Time of Prayer can follow.

Some Hymn Suggestions

Come Holy Ghost Our Souls Inspire

Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost

Holy, Holy, Holy