

11th January, 2015.

Readings: Genesis 1: 1 – 5

Mark 1: 1 – 11

Sermon

Today's Gospel reading speaks of Jesus baptising people in the Holy Spirit but I want to look today at something of what the Holy Spirit does in our lives. To do that, I am going back to the beginning, back to the Book of Genesis in which we read that **the earth was formless and empty...** and it says that **the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.** The passage then goes on to create for us a picture of the world coming into being.

Peter Neilson, on the Church of Scotland website, says that the opening words of Genesis assure us that life has purpose and meaning because God brings order to the chaos and fills the void with new life. The Holy Spirit hovers over the earth bringing order out of chaos and that is still one of the functions, if I can call it that, it's still one of the functions of the Holy Spirit today, in our world and in our individual lives.

That's quite an encouraging message at the start of this new year and at a time when our world seems to be in utter chaos. The threat of terrorism

looms large and no one knows who poses the threat, not until it's too late.

It's a situation which can instil fear in the lives of individuals who are going about their daily business unsure of where the terrorists will strike next. That fear and that chaos engulfed Paris during the week. At Friday teatime, the thought that we were left with was what would happen the next day. There had been two days of terror. Would someone else strike on Saturday? The fact the email is missing suggests that the reign of terror is not yet over.

Can you picture the Holy Spirit hovering over the individuals in that chaotic situation, waiting to enter their lives to bring order and to replace the chaos with purpose and meaning? Can you picture the Holy Spirit waiting to bring those individuals new life, not just the terrorists but all of the people involved?

There are many situations in our world which make no sense. There are many situations in our own lives which make no sense. I heard on Wednesday about the death of an eighteen year old from cancer, and eighteen year old whom I had known as a five year old with cancer. Looking at a picture of that young man who looked so healthy until just recently, and who had just started university this year, it makes no sense and it will

certainly make no sense to his parents and to his family and friends.

I had the television on the other morning while I got ready to go out. Jeremy Kyle was on but I just happened to catch the tail end of the programme. It had been a tribute to someone who had previously been on the programme.

He was talking about a young girl whose life had been driven by heroin and who, after appearing on his programme, managed to turn her life around. She was only thirteen weeks into that and doing incredibly well. She was helping her peers to kick the habit, as she was trying to do.

When she was twelve weeks clean, she had appeared back on the programme to let people see how well she was doing. She also appeared back to show the public that those behind the scenes on the programme really did indeed provided excellent aftercare.

A week later, at thirteen weeks, she suffered a massive heart attack due to the abuse her body had suffered previously. Before appearing on the programme, her life had been out of control and had descended into chaos but she was managing to turn it around with the help of a twelve step programme. Then suddenly, it was all over.

Her mother and sisters are left now trying to make sense of it all but proud of what their daughter had achieved in a short space of time. She looked amazing after only twelve weeks. Order was being brought out of the chaos of her life with the help of a Higher Power which Bill W., who began the twelve step programme, called God.

The Holy Spirit hovers over us waiting to create new life within us so that new possibilities, new opportunities, new horizons may open up to each one of us, even in situations which seem hopeless. With God there is always hope. That young girl's mother wants other addicts to know that there is hope for them just as there was hope for her daughter.

There is hope for each one of us no matter the situation in which we find ourselves and even if we cannot see it. When order is brought out of chaos, it's worth noting, that it's not always our situation which changes.

Sometimes what changes is how we view our situation. The order can be brought to our chaotic minds. How we view things can change them dramatically. The Chinese demonstrate that in their sign for the word 'problem'. The sign is the same as the sign for the word 'opportunity'.

When we see our problems as opportunities, they become something positive, rather than something negative, and that is the beginning of order coming out of chaos. The Holy Spirit hovers over us waiting for us to see our opportunities.

But the Holy Spirit does more than that. John the Baptist is standing in the river Jordan immersing people in the water. He is baptising with water but he says of Jesus to the people who have gathered: **I have baptised you with water; but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.** As Peter Neilson points out, John presents the Holy Spirit to us as something which surrounds us and envelops us. He speaks of a God-filled environment.

In baptism, people were immersed in the water. They were enclosed in that watery environment, so as Jesus baptises us in the Holy Spirit, we will find ourselves completely enveloped by the Spirit. We are invited by Jesus to live in that new God-filled environment where God's Spirit completely surrounds us like the air we breathe. If that air is withdrawn, we die. Jesus makes the Holy Spirit as available to us as the air we breathe. We are completely surrounded by the Holy Spirit.

The evidence of our God-filled lives, Paul says, is evidenced by the gifts of the Holy Spirit as they

appear in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Do we simply leave the Spirit of God hovering above us waiting to create order out of the chaos of our lives? Do we simply leave the Spirit which surrounds us, surrounding us externally, or do we admit into the Holy Spirit into our lives and allow Him to impact on them? I ask because that is the third characteristic of the Spirit to which I want to draw our attention today. The Holy Spirit inhabits us.

To illustrate evidence of the Holy Spirit, or if you prefer, of the fruits of the Spirit, I want to elaborate on a story I told at Tom's funeral on Friday. It concerns the ice-cream wars.

When Tom was delivering ice-cream he got to know a group of boys who always congregated at one particular house where Tom ended his run. He got to know them well and as they were unemployed he always handed in a couple of tubs of ice cream to them, free of charge, at the end of the night.

On one particular night, one of the rival van men saw Tom appear in his van. He was heading in the opposite direction but turned his van and with his hand on the horn followed Tom all the way to his

final destination. Tom didn't stop till he got there because he didn't want to get involved.

The van pulled up in front of Tom's and Tom put his hand on the horn and hoped the boys he knew were at home. Out they came and surrounded the other van and began to shake it violently. They would probably have broken into the other van if a neighbour hadn't announced that the police were on their way. The boys pull back and the other van driver made a hasty retreat.

When the police arrived, Tom had to go to station and make a statement. He was believed because the other driver was notorious and had been in trouble before. However, Tom asked them not to press charges.

Shortly afterwards, the other driver crossed Tom's path again with a very different outcome. In some strange way, Tom had gained his respect. He came over to Tom's van and asked if he could buy an ice-cream, saying that he wanted to taste a decent ice, rather than the rubbish he sold. Tom gave him one for nothing in the interest of future good relations and he had no further bother.

What fruit was evident there? Love, goodness, gentleness even maybe self-control. Our faith should impact on how we treat others which in turn impacts

on how others treat us.

The gift of the Holy Spirit was given to Jesus at His baptism and He passed that gift on to us after His resurrection.

Peter Neilson talks of God taking on flesh again by inhabiting our bodies and we are called to represent God and to re-present God, to make God present again in our world and in our situations.

Paul once asked the question: Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed? The question is: Have we or have we missed part of the gift given to us by God? Has God given us more than we realise?

That gift of the Holy Spirit hovers above us, surrounds us, envelops us and waits to be invited into our lives that we might re-present God to the world around us through our actions, through our reactions, through our witness and through lives which are transformed.