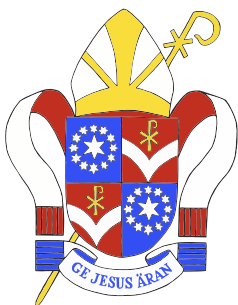




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The wind blows wherever it pleases – and I didn't know

A letter from Bishop Åke Bonnier about the Holy Spirit



Svenska kyrkan 
SKARA STIFT

Photo: Carla Karlsson



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The Holy Spirit is sometimes hard to get a handle through reason. It is not about some kind of spirit you can get in touch with “on the other side” through séances, and it is certainly not some kind of phantom despite the fact that one of the various English translations of “the Holy Spirit” is “the Holy Ghost”!

No, talk of the Holy Spirit is rather a way for us to both understand and realise that the only God is “Three-in-One and One-in-Three” (Swedish Hymn book 338), that God is always present, that God is the God of whole creation and that God has shared our humanity in a unique way as a historical person and who has shown us, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that love is stronger than the forces of destruction.

THIS LETTER is the third in a series about the Trinity – a theme that has formed a common thread since 2015 in course material and lectures produced by the Diocese of Skara.

The first year focused on the Son. The second was the Year of the Father and this year, then, will be focusing on the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the worldwide Lutheran church will be celebrating in 2017 the fact that it is 500 years since the Reformation was initiated by Martin Luther. It started when, as tradition has it, he nailed his fabled theses to the church doors at Wittenberg.

When I think about the Holy Spirit my thoughts go to the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis.

Already in the second verse we come across the Holy Spirit, flapping or hovering (“hovering” is the word apparently used in the original Hebrew text) over the turbulent waters. In the Bible it says: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” (Genesis 1:2).

It is precisely the Holy Spirit whom God acts through, this Holy Spirit that creates and permeates the whole of Creation so that everything that is created is holy. When we walk through forest and over land, when we travel across the sea and fly through the sky, when we live our lives in towns and villages, we find that everything is holy.

Every lawn is holy, every tree, every mountain, every lake, the air we breathe, every fish, every insect, every bug, every mammal and so on. It goes without saying that every human is holy. Everything is a creation of God. Incidentally, it is worth noting that the Holy Spirit is a feminine description, since Spirit is called *ruach* in Hebrew, a feminine noun.

War, violence and terror, are these holy also? No, everything that we perceive as destructive is the result of human activity. The world of profane action is therefore the work of man when man, despite being holy of himself, blocks the action of the Holy Spirit, chooses the evil side and betrays his calling to be God’s fellow creator. Man then desecrates the world.

WE CAN, further, in the Old Testament, follow the Holy Spirit’s actions in the accounts of the kings anointed with oil. The acts are expressions of the fact they are God’s Chosen Ones. The oil is a symbol of

God's presence, his will and his spirit. The kings are therefore some kinds of "ministers" in the kingdom of God. Equally, the prophets of the Old Testament were guided by the Holy Spirit and were able to, in that manner, express the will of God. God's spirit is therefore active from the first page of the Holy Book onwards.

Jesus himself came into existence, according to the Gospel of St Luke, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. "But the angel answered: The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." (Luke 1:35). The Spirit was present at the baptism of Jesus. (Matthew 3:16), and when Jesus preached in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-21), he mentioned that the Spirit was active in him. Everything Jesus said and did was an expression of God's Spirit, that is to say, of God, so that we as Christians can confess that Jesus was and is a true God and a true Human.

AS JESUS APPROACHED the end of his earthly life, he held, according to the Gospel of St John, a farewell speech (John 14-17) where he told his holy disciples that the Holy Spirit would come to them. The Holy Spirit there is called "the Advocate" (John 14:16, 26;15:7).

The advocate is a helper who will assist the disciples in understanding more of Jesus's teachings and more of his life's activities. Not least, the advocate assists in a greater understanding about what Jesus's death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead means. The advocate, in other words "the helper", shows us the truth about God and how God, in his ubiquitous way, acts upon our existence.

So then there was that wonderful event at Whitsun when Jesus came to the disciples and filled them with

faith so that they would spread and tell the world about the great events that happened through Jesus of Nazareth, that is to say, to spread news of God's great deeds.

We usually say that Whitsunday is the birthday of the church. When the promised spirit came, you could say the resurrected Jesus was present with his disciples - but in a new way. The disciples were then filled with an enthusiasm to talk about the death and resurrection of Jesus, about his life-giving, about the divine love which breaks down all barriers.

It was no longer about which people you belonged to: their messages were aimed as much at the Jewish people as at the goyim - the heathens. The apostle Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and realised that the God whom he so actively had prayed to as a practising Jew now called on him to follow and proclaim the same God through Jesus of Nazareth. All this was a work of the Holy Spirit, who is present today and always.

EVERY CHURCH in the Diocese of Skara bears witness to the Holy Spirit. They stand there in our lovely locality and call out the wonderful Gospel about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is just a question of hearing that call amidst all the noise of this high velocity society in which we live. When we speak of the spirit we speak of Jesus Christ. When we talk about the Spirit we speak of our Father the Creator. When we speak of God we speak of all three.

We believe in a single God. But God, who is one, meets us in different ways and in each of these ways God is present. When we say that we, in word and deed, shall talk clearly of Jesus we can only do that if we talk about the entire Trinity at the same time. Everything belongs together.

That the Spirit comes from the Father and the Son is something we confess to in the Nicene creed. And the Western church has stuck to that and that pleases us. Because that very creed expresses the idea that God is a God whose being is relation. God is in himself, inasmuch in that we can speak of a God as a "himself", a relation. And God wants a relation to you and me.

That is why God meets us in the beauty and fragility of creation. That is why God meets us in a unique way through Jesus of Nazareth. That is why God meets us in every fellow human being and every vibrating atom. It is about the Holy Spirit who sweeps through earthly time, chronos, and creates the time of God, kairos.



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BUT IF THE SPIRIT is now God: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit at one and the same time, is the Holy Spirit tied to the Christian belief and context? There is a Church tradition that argues that the Holy Spirit does not function in other religions, that it is solely Christian.

I say: I think about those wonderful words of Jesus in the Gospel of St John. There it says: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.” (John 3:8) I interpret that as the ubiquitous Spirit, the God whom one meets in unexpected situations, where we did not believe that God would be (Genesis 28:16-17).

The concept of the Holy Spirit may be a Christian one but the Holy Spirit turns up in situations outside Christian domain too.

In the Epistle to the Galatians in the New Testament, we can read of the fruits of the Holy Spirit – that is, a result of the Holy Spirit’s “activity”. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

These fruits we find also outside the Christian domain. In other words, we can see that God meets in a wonderful way also those who inhabit contexts outside our own. Obviously we shall with joy and pride speak of our own faith. At the same time we Christi-

ans ought to listen with interest and “holy envy” to our fellow brothers and sisters from different religious contexts and other faiths.

Perhaps we can then discover what is fantastic about other traditions that we lack in our own. God is, as we know, always greater than what our confessions can encompass. Yes, the truth about God is always greater than the truth about God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 The Holy Spirit operates here and now in your life too. Such is God. God cannot be locked up in holy buildings. When you look at your life in the rear-view mirror – can you see that you have had the divine spirit’s guidance in some way?

2 What does God as the Holy Spirit mean to you?

3. In their daily lives people are often unaware of the sacredness and beauty of creation. Man often supports evil structures that exploit and abuse the resources of the planet. What are your views on that?

4. The thought that God’s spirit is active also outside the context of the Church and the Christian tradition - what are your thoughts on that?