

2 COR 3.18: GOD SENDS HIS LIFE-CHANGING SPIRIT

[Chelmsford, Pentecost Sunday 2011]

Today is Pentecost Sunday – the day when God began to pour out his Spirit.
That first Pentecost Sunday must have been an amazing experience:

“Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to do” (Acts 2.2-3)

Wow! What an amazing experience! Strong wind blowing and tongues of fire.

And yet we mustn't get hung up on the wind and the tongues of fire.

For first and foremost Pentecost is not about wind and fire.

Rather it is about the gift of the Spirit.

The wind and the tongues of fire are in fact as important as the wise men and the star are to the Christmas story – they are trivial in comparison to the main event.

I find it significant that when Peter stood up to explain what had happened, he said not a word about the rushing wind and the tongues of fire. Rather, he began by quoting from the prophet Joel; **“This is what I will do in the last days, God says: I will pour out my Spirit on everyone” (Joel 2.28)**

Yes, Pentecost is the day when God began to pour out his Spirit.

Please notice my use of the word **“began”**.

Pentecost is not just a celebration of something that happened in the past, but of someone who is with us in the present.

Christmas is a one-off, in the sense that we celebrate that at a particular time in history God came to us in the person of his Son.

Good Friday and Easter Day are one-offs too, in the sense that at a particular time in history Jesus defeated the powers of sin and death.

By contrast Pentecost is repeatable – for God continues to send his Spirit to his people.

True in one-sense Pentecost is a one-off.

There was an element of uniqueness about the first Whitsunday.

The Holy Spirit does not normally come in strong wind and tongues of fire.

But the Holy Spirit does still come – in the words of Peter, he comes to all who **“call upon the name of the Lord”**

Another key difference between Pentecost and the two other Christian festivals, is that, while Christmas and Easter focus primarily on what happened to Jesus, Pentecost celebrates on what happens to us.

True, we must beware of over-emphasising the distinction: we have benefited from the coming of Jesus into our world, just as we have benefited from the death and resurrection of Jesus. But at Pentecost we celebrate less the event and more an ongoing experience of God in our lives.

It is in this context that, as part of our series on 2 Corinthians, I want us to look at what the Apostle Paul has to say about the Holy Spirit. In 2 Cor 3.18 he writes: **“All of us reflect the glory of the Lord...; and the same glory, coming from the Lord, who is the Spirit, transforms us into his likeness in an every greater degree of glory”**. Or as the REB translates: **“We all see as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, and we are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, through the power of the Lord who is the Spirit”**

1. THE SPIRIT ENABLES US TO SEE GOD IN HIS GLORY

“We all see as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” (REB).

Glory is an Old Testament term for the awesome presence of God

- Moses when he encountered God on Mount Sinai was overwhelmed by the **glory** of God – the glory was part of the divine presence
- Ezekiel spoke of the day when the **glory** of God left the temple – i.e. a day when God turned his back upon his people and was no longer to be found in the temple they had built for him.

The message of the New Testament, however, is that God’s glory has now taken human form. In the words of John: **“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory”** (John 1.14 NRSV)

Or in the words of Paul found just a few verses further on in 2 Cor 4: **“The God who said, ‘Out of darkness the light shall shine!’ is the same God who made his light shine in our hearts, to bring us the knowledge of God’s glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ”** (2 Cor 4.6)

Paul is here looking back upon his experience on the Damascus Road, when to his amazement he encountered the living Lord Jesus. As he reflects upon that experience he interprets it in terms of the creation story of the first chapter of Genesis.

- There in Genesis the writer depicted a scene of primeval chaos: **“the earth was formless and desolate”**. But then God spoke, and there was order.
- **“Everything was engulfed in total darkness”**, but then God spoke, and there was light.

For Paul this was a perfect illustration of the difference that God had made to his own life. Before he encountered God on the road to Damascus, there was chaos, there was darkness. But then God spoke and there was light, light so blinding that it left him temporarily physically blind.

Significantly, however, here in 2 Corinthians Paul internalizes the experience. He speaks of God shining **in our hearts**. Not everybody has had a Damascus Road experience. Many of us have come to Christ much more gradually. But whatever our experience or indeed lack of experience, all of us have discovered that Jesus is the means through which God shines his light and makes himself known. Jesus is you like is the filter through which God makes his glory known. Without such a filter the light of God would blind us permanently.

NT Wright in his commentary on 2 Corinthians tells of a time when there was to be a total eclipse of the sun. “The newspapers and the radio and television stations repeatedly put out warnings, reminding people that they should not attempt to look directly at the sun. Even ordinary sunglasses would not protect.” Only specially thickened and darkened glass would do. “The warnings kept coming. Finally, a lady wrote to one of the national newspapers about it. If this eclipse was so dangerous, she said, why were we having one in the first place.”!

“We all see as in a mirror the glory of the Lord”.

Jesus mirrors the glory of the Lord. What’s more, says Paul in 2 Cor 4.4, Jesus is **“the exact likeness of God”** – literally he is the **“image”** of God.

In him we truly see God. And this, says Paul, is the work of **“the Lord who is the Spirit”**.

Yes, God's glory - seen in the face of Jesus - has shone in our hearts.

None of us have seen Jesus physically - and yet we have seen him in our hearts..

The Lord of glory has been - and continues to be - made known through the eye of faith. And this is the work of the Spirit.

This morning as we eat bread and drink wine, let me encourage you to focus with your minds and hearts on the one who loved us & gave himself for us - and as we do so, we shall see something of God’s **glory** - the Spirit will make him known to us.

2. THE SPIRIT ENABLES US TO REFLECT GOD’S GLORY

“All of us see as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” – so the REB. Similarly the NRSV speaks of **“seeing the glory as though reflected in a mirror”**.

But another translation is possible. The GNB translates: **“All of us...reflect the glory of the Lord”**. Similarly the NIV: **“We all reflect the Lord’s glory”**.

The fact is that the underlying Greek verb has both the meaning of "seeing" and of "reflecting". Indeed, it is my conviction that both meanings are present here.

I.e. we don't have to choose between "seeing" or "reflecting".

Paul intended both meanings to be present.

For it is as we turn to look at the Lord of glory, we begin to reflect him.

Indeed, we cannot reflect the Lord Jesus if we do not focus on him

My mind goes to words of Jesus found in Sermon on the Mount: **“You are the light of the world”**

These were words addressed to his followers, his disciples.

In our own strength, we cannot act as light to the world.

To be light, we need to first to look at Jesus, the Light of the World - and then reflect his light. We can only be light to the world as we mirror the light of Christ.

Likewise if we are to reflect the glory of Christ, we must first look to him.

Sadly, all too often the last thing we do is to reflect the glory of Christ.

- Let's be honest: the reason why our lives are so full of pride & prejudice is that we have not spent time gazing on Jesus.

- The reason why our lives are all too often characterised by discontent, by anger, and even by bitterness is that we spend more time looking at others than at him. If we are to reflect Jesus, then we must cultivate our relationship with him. We must spend more time with Jesus

Every now and again I come across someone who says to me "*You are just like your father*". Apparently there is something in my voice/mannerisms which remind those who knew my father of him. Why? Because of the time I have spent in his company. We are influenced by the company we keep.

"All of us... reflect the glory of the Lord"

Would that this were to be so! Would that all of us reflected the Lord Jesus - would that the lives of all of us were characterised by love, joy, peace – and all the other fruit of the Spirit.

Wishful thinking? Maybe! And yet not impossible thinking. For all we need to do is to open up our lives to him

3. THE SPIRIT GLORIOUSLY TRANSFORMS US

The great Bible translator JB Phillips once wrote: "*Every time we say 'I believe in the Holy Spirit', we mean that we believe there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it*". This is in effect what Paul is saying here.

"That some glory, coming from the Lord, who is the Spirit, transforms us into his likeness in an ever greater degree of glory".

Or in the words of the REB: **"And all of us... are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit"**

Reflection leads to transformation. Wow!

At this point the metaphor begins to break down. For Paul speaks of reflecting the glory of the Lord **"as though in a mirror"**.

But the metaphor of a mirror is inadequate: when a mirror catches the sun, it reflects the sun's rays without in the least being changed..

But we contemplate and reflect the glory of the Lord **"we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another"** (NRSV). In Peterson's paraphrase: "*And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him*"

The form of the verb is highly instructive. Let me analyse it for you.

i) the verb is present continuous in tense

"We are being transformed/changed" (not we are transformed/changed) - Paul has in mind an ongoing process.

- This ongoing process of change is not to be confused with the decisive turning to Christ which takes place at the beginning of the Christian life - Paul is not speaking about *conversion*.

- Nor is this ongoing process of change to be confused with the change we shall experience at the end of our life here on earth - Paul is not speaking about our final '*glorification*'.
- Rather he is speaking about a progressive and ongoing process which in previous times was termed '*sanctification*' - a being 'conformed' to Christ by degrees - an increasing demonstration of his Spirit at work in our lives.

The older we are the more Christlike we should be - that is the theory. Strictly speaking those of us who have known Christ for 20/30/40/50 years should be displaying more and more of Christ. But sadly that is not always true. The tragedy is that many Christians have become stunted in their spiritual development.

It's easy to point the finger at others. But before we do so, let's examine our own lives. How dynamic is our faith. Are we allowing the Spirit to change us - day by day?

ii) passive in mood

Paul says: "**we are being transformed**".

The change is not something we do - but something which is done to and for us as we open ourselves in faith to the Lord.

It is the work of the Spirit that transforms, not human effort.

There is nothing that I can do to become more loving, more patient, more joyful - all I can do is increasingly to open my life to the Lord

iii) plural in number

"WE are being transformed"

Most of the time we are concerned with no 1 - with how might I increase in love...

But here Paul talks of himself and others *together reflecting the glory of the Lord*.

I.e. it is not given to any one person to reflect more than a little of the Lord's glory.

Each individual Christian can be nothing more than one in a circle of many mirrors set around the great central light. Each has its own glint of brightness - the reflection that is appropriate from that angle and in that situation.

It takes all the mirrors being in a right relationship to one another to reflect the brightness of the light from every angle. *The complete glory of Christ can be exhibited only in the presence of all his people.*

Together we are called to reflect the glory of the Lord - together we are called to be God's chandelier.