

Thursday 14 May 2026, Pentecost Choral Eucharist

John 7.37-39

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Sometimes when I read the bible, I get confused. A strange verse throws up a question I hadn't considered before. I'm challenged to ask myself what I really think about something.

In the case of our gospel reading, I was really struck by this line: *he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.* That little phrase 'for as yet there was no Spirit' got me thinking.

Is John's gospel saying that the Holy Spirit didn't exist in the world before Pentecost? Well, that can't be true because even in Genesis we read about the Spirit 'hovering over the waters' of chaos before creation.

Is John saying that before Pentecost, believers in the messiah hadn't received the Holy Spirit? Well, that can't be true either because we do see the Spirit 'falling on' certain people in the Old Testament, often giving them power to prophecy or do amazing things.

But that sense that the Spirit falls on people at particular moments is different to what the New Testament says about the Spirit. And I think there lies the key to this odd little verse in John; it's almost an aside, but theologically, it's a very significant little aside.

And it turns out, lots of Christian thinkers agree. The question this verse poses is essentially this: 'did believers in Jesus (the messiah) before Pentecost have the Holy Spirit within them?' The majority view is either 'no' or 'not in the same way.'

Now, I want to explain why I think this should matter to you. We are used to thinking of the Holy Spirit as integral to our identity: Christians are people who have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. We talk about receiving the Holy Spirit at baptism. We talk about receiving the Holy Spirit at confirmation. At priestly ordinations the Bishop says, 'Send down the Holy Spirit on your servant for the office and work of a priest in your Church.' In some churches people talk about being Spirit-led or Spirit-filled.

Yet John seems to be saying that before Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, believers in God didn't have the Holy Spirit in this way and didn't think of themselves as having the Spirit.

That puts us in a very special position. It means that we are qualitatively different from God's people before Pentecost. We live in a different thought-world and in a different spiritual world. Before Pentecost, the Holy Spirit acted 'on' believers. After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit acts 'in' believers. God is no longer external to us, but instead God is internal, in our very hearts and

bodies. So Paul can write to the church at Corinth: 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you.'

Have you ever considered what it means that the Holy Spirit dwells within you and that you are its Temple? Think about what you know of the Temple in Jerusalem: it was the special place of God's presence. It was a glorious building, adorned with fine marble and much gold. It was a place of special devotion, a place to which very faithful Jew looked with hope and expectation. In the Holy of Holies, at its heart, sat the Ark of the Covenant originally containing the Ten Commandments, Aaron's staff that budded, and a jar of manna. The place between the cherubim above it was called the Mercy Seat where God's visible glory, the shekinah, descended. The High Priest of the Temple was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies only once a year on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement.

This most special and wonderful Temple is the thing to which Paul compares you. Everyone who believes in Jesus and has been baptised has received the Holy Spirit and become a living Temple, the special place where God dwells. And he dwells in you not only once a year, but all day, every day. There is no moment where the Holy Spirit departs from you; in you is the mercy seat where God's special presence sits. In your heart are the Ten Commandments. You are a royal priesthood after the pattern of Aaron. And you feed on the true manna, Jesus Christ, in every eucharist. So you don't have to go somewhere, to look to somewhere far away, to find God. God is not 'out there' but he is 'in here', in you.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, Joshua, David, and Solomon: these could only dream of being as you are. They longed for the presence of God and they found it in special places and at special times. You have the presence of God in you in ordinary places and ordinary times and that presence transforms the ordinary into the special. You are not ordinary, your life is not ordinary, your words and actions are not ordinary. You and all you do is made holy and special by the Holy Spirit's presence in you.

You are never alone, no matter how lonely you feel. You are always understood, no matter how misunderstood you feel. You are seen, no matter how invisible you feel. You are treasured, no matter how worthless you feel. You are special, no matter how unremarkable you feel. Your body, your heart, your mind, is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

What seems like a little aside in John's gospel, 'for as yet there was no Spirit', turns out to be rather a big deal. The Lord is here, in his believing people. The Lord, the one who made the universe and sustains it by his power, is here in you: heaven and earth in little space. Frail bodies made temples of his praise. Thanks be to God! Amen.