

(4) The Spirit of Mission

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[0 : 00] The reading is from John, it's chapter 20, verses 19 to 29, and that's page 1093. On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, Peace be with you.

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. And then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven. If you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld. Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord. But he said to them, Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

[1 : 15] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here, and see my hands, and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.

Thomas answered him, My Lord and my God. Jesus said to him, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for your time, and thank you for your time, and thank you for your time, and welcome back to Grace Church. Well, a certain time ago, a magazine came through our letterbox from a Christian mission agency.

It explained that in one particular African country, they support 60 men and women engaged in the work of preaching the message of Jesus Christ, and planting churches.

[2 : 33] They work in 30 pairs, in 10 different non-Christian regions of that particular country. The places they work in are remote, and many of the people they work amongst are hostile to the claims of Jesus.

Yet, despite the hostility, those 60 men and women have seen much fruit. In the last three years, they have planted 107 new churches.

Close to home, I read last week of a qualified doctor with a research degree, who had applied for the post of consultant surgeon at over 20 teaching hospitals in this country. He was unsuccessful in every application.

And an eminent pathologist asked him into his office, he said, Do you know why it is that you haven't been appointed to any of these posts? The reply, It is because you have a reputation for being religious.

He went on to say, And I don't want to discourage you in that. But nonetheless, it's interesting, isn't it? Here was a medic who was not afraid to speak of Jesus, and to do so in the context of his day-to-day work.

[3 : 46] Well, whether in Africa or here at home, what is it that you think motivated those people? There are many things, but one thing I'm sure of is that they would have stopped at once if it wasn't for this work of the Holy Spirit that we are looking at today, and that Jesus teaches us about in John chapter 20.

This is the last in our series of four talks, if you've been following the series. This series of four talks looking at the work of the Holy Spirit from the lips of Jesus himself in John's Gospel.

As Jesus explains to us through John's Gospel, especially at the end of John's Gospel, the work of the Spirit. And today we see that he is a Spirit of mission. He's the Spirit of mission.

You see, perhaps we're here, perhaps today, looking in on the Christian faith, so to speak. And we've wondered, what is it that motivates Christians to engage in the work of Jesus? Or perhaps we're wondering, well, if we were to follow Jesus ourselves, what is it that would enable us to engage in the work of Jesus?

Or perhaps we're here this morning, we're discouraged or tired in the work of Jesus. Or perhaps we feel we've barely started. Well, here is great news. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of mission.

[5 : 09] Now, today we're just looking at three verses. John chapter 20, verses 21 to 23. And if you just have a look at them, you'll see in verse 22, Jesus promises that the Spirit will come.

And then either side of that, in verse 21 and verse 23, you have a statement about what the Spirit will achieve. Or to put it another way, what the Spirit-filled looks like, what the Spirit-filled life looks like.

And you'll see on the outline, we're going to focus then on those two things. Firstly, verse 21. And secondly, verse 23. First of all then, verses 21 and 22. What does the Spirit-filled life look like?

It is to be engaged in the mission of Jesus. It is to be engaged in the mission of Jesus. Have a look at verse 21. Jesus said to his disciples again, Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

Now, here we are. We're at the very end of John's Gospel. You'll see at the beginning there of John chapter 20, this is the resurrection. We're in the middle of a series of resurrection appearances as the risen Jesus makes it clear that he has indeed been raised from the dead.

[6 : 21] And here we see Jesus promising that when the Spirit comes, he will enable those who follow Jesus to be engaged in the mission of Jesus.

Churches love talking about mission. In the city, where many of you will know, I'm also a minister up there, they're encouraged to have mission statements, and every church has to have its mission statement.

But scratch beneath the surface, and you quickly discover that when churches talk about mission, what they mean by mission can vary hugely from one church to another.

So for one church in the city, for example, it's being involved in a fair trade initiative. For another, it's running a sort of counselling service. For another, it's proclaiming the message of Jesus.

So we need to ask the question, what does Jesus mean when he talks about the mission of the church? And we can see, I think, the answer very clearly in the second half of verse 21, as he says, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

[7 : 32] In other words, the mission of the church is the mission of Jesus. As Jesus was sent by God the Father, so Christians are sent by Jesus.

In other words, the church is a church under orders, so to speak, under orders from the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and is not free to decide what its mission will be.

Throughout John's Gospel, we see that the mission of Jesus was to reveal God. For example, John 1.18, which I put there on the outline, we're told no one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side, that's Jesus, he has made him known.

So part of the mission of Jesus was to reveal God, but he was also to bring us God's rescue and to enable the forgiveness of sins. Again, on the outline, John 1.29, describing Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And one of the features of John's Gospel, perhaps you've begun to see it as we've been working through John's Gospel in our study groups on Tuesday evenings and Friday mornings, one of the features of John's Gospel is that Jesus often describes himself as the Son of God.

[8 : 55] Because if you were a first century Jew and you had an important message to deliver, you wouldn't have sent it by email or by post office, assuming they weren't on strike, or even by using a courier service or a messenger boy, you'd have sent your son, preferably your firstborn son.

Well, Jesus is the one and only son of his heavenly Father who has been entrusted with the all-important mission of revealing God to the world and of rescuing humanity or bringing forgiveness.

And therefore, verse 21, the mission of the disciples derives from this mission of Jesus. Just as Jesus was sent, so they will be sent. They don't have their own separate mission.

Just as Jesus did the work of his heavenly Father, so they will do the work of Jesus. Just as Jesus did his Father's works, so they will do Jesus' works.

Just as Jesus spoke the words of the Father, so they will speak the words of Jesus. In other words, Jesus' mission didn't sort of end when he ascended back to heaven.

[10:11] Rather, it continues throughout history through his disciples. After all, back in John chapter 14, verse 12, Jesus promised that those who believe in him will be engaged in greater works than Jesus.

Again, it's on the outline. Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do and greater works than these he will do because I am going to the Father. Obviously, not greater works in the sense of greater miracles, but greater works because after Jesus' death and resurrection, they will be able to proclaim the full benefits of forgiveness and eternal life that flow from Jesus' death.

The benefits of his death will be extended across the world through Jesus' disciples who are sent into the world. So, you see, this is what it means to live in the age of the Spirit.

It is to grasp that if we are Christians, we are sent by Jesus and we are engaged in his work as his Spirit enables us to do so.

Engaged in Jesus' mission as he works through his followers. The church is under orders and therefore, while, yes, of course, free trade things and providing a counselling service and so on, they are worthy things.

[11:34] We mustn't confuse those things with the mission of the church, which is to continue the work of Jesus in this way. In other words, mission is not primarily about what we decide we want to do as a church.

Rather, mission is about what Jesus is doing in his world by his Spirit. And the issue for us as a church and as individuals is will we be part of it.

Just listen to the words of William Temple, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who, I think, put it very clearly. He said, this is the primary purpose for which the Spirit is given, that we may bear witness to Christ.

We must not expect the gift while we ignore the purpose. It's a great summary, isn't it, of what Jesus is teaching here in John chapter 20. Let me read it again. This is the primary purpose for which the Spirit is given, that we may bear witness to Christ.

We must not expect the gift while we ignore the purpose. It's what that consultant surgeon, I mentioned at the beginning, recognised, that the coming of the Spirit changes our connection with the world.

[12:48] No longer just a consultant surgeon, but a consultant surgeon engaged in the mission of Jesus. To be filled by the Spirit is to be engaged in the mission of Jesus.

But secondly, it is to be empowered for the mission of Jesus. It is to be empowered for the mission of Jesus. Have a look at verse 22.

And when Jesus had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit. Now I think this is a verse which can sometimes cause confusion, and we just need to be clear that at this point, Jesus is not giving the Spirit to his disciples here in John chapter 20.

You can read about that at Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. Rather, I think verse 22 here is best seen as a sort of anticipation, if you like, of what will happen when the Spirit does come at Pentecost.

Besides, back in John chapter 16, verse 7, Jesus had said that his Spirit wouldn't come until he himself, until Jesus himself, had gone away, until after his ascension.

[14:02] So I think it's best to see verse 22 as an anticipation of Pentecost, of the Spirit coming, rather than as Pentecost itself. But do feel free to ask further about that later on if you want to.

But what is it that will happen when the Spirit comes? verse 23, if you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven. If you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.

The forgiveness of sins was at the very heart of Jesus' mission. Jesus' assumption in John 3, verse 18, which I put on the outline, is that men and women, all of us, face God's wrath naturally, by nature, on the final day.

Just look at John 3, 18, as he says, whoever believes in him, that's Jesus speaking of himself, is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

It's the answer, isn't it, to the frequently asked question, what happens to those who have never heard about Jesus? Well, Jesus' answer is that our default position, so to speak, is that we are condemned already for not believing in him.

[15:19] And therefore, of course, when people do hear the message of Jesus, one of two things happen. John 3, 36, whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

And therefore, back in John 20, verse 23, while this language of forgiveness and withholding forgiveness, it sounds rather harsh, doesn't it? But actually, it is simply the result of the message of Jesus Christ being proclaimed.

It either brings men and women to repent and to forgiveness, or it leaves them unresponsive and unforgiven. And this is the message that the Spirit empowers God's people to be involved in. not just some of God's people, but all. Not just the strong, not just the outwardly impressive, but also the rest of us.

After all, it's just what we see in the book of Acts, as the Spirit empowers the apostles to take the message of Jesus to the very ends of the earth. earth.

[16:36] In his book, Killing Fields, Living Fields, which I guess some of us may have read, Don Cormac tells a very ordinary but very remarkable young boy who had grasped this.

The book tells the plight of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and the many Cambodians who fled to refugee camps in Thailand. And this is what Don Cormac writes.

There were a number of other Cambodian Christians who, mostly because they had family still in Cambodia, did not join the stampede from those camps to the west but returned home.

One willing returnee, however, stood out beyond all the others. He was a young lad named Chen. Chen was 14 years old and was terminally ill with cancer. One day he took me completely off guard when he said, in my village back in Cambodia, no one has ever heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want to go and tell them. Not very convincingly, I tried to explain that it is illegal and the mission I worked with would never allow it. He was puzzled that these human constraints should stand in the way of proclaiming the message of salvation to those who so desperately needed to hear it.

[17:49] A few days later, he greeted me with his usual sunny smile and explained that since I wouldn't go and no one else is able to go, he himself would go. But you're so weak and thin, I reminded him.

You need to remain here where you can be cared for properly. Nothing, however, would change his mind and he set off with his brother who had also become a Christian. Christian. The doctors had operated on Chen some weeks earlier, but it was too late.

They had given him about three months to live. Armed with tracts and gospel portions, he returned with his brother to the border and set off back to his home village.

The way was fraught with danger, mines, bandits, and all the privations of war-torn Cambodia. He was probably the weakest, most foolish, lowly, and despised Christian to be found anywhere in the border refugee camps at that time.

But he was the one who gladly trusted and obeyed when the Lord beckoned. And Don Cormac adds, only eternity will disclose the consequences of his unique mission to his village.

[19:02] Well, there is a 14-year-old boy, weak, powerless, yet trusting the empowering of the spirits for the work of mission. Perhaps you've had the experience of someone telling you they've put their trust in Christ and you've been able to do the work of verse 23 that Jesus speaks about here to assure them that having put their trust in Christ they now stand before God forgiven.

Or perhaps you've explained the message of Jesus to someone they've rejected it and so you've done the loving thing, you've done the caring thing, and told them that they must realise that they remain unforgiven until they have put their trust in Christ.

They remain unforgiven before God. Now both of those works are important works to be involved in. They are great works to be involved with because it's Jesus' work and it's the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to do that.

Which I take it makes the work of mission exciting rather than daunting. It means of course mission isn't simply about what we do overseas, but mission is the work of Jesus wherever it is, in Dulwich, up in, or wherever, in this country, or further afield.

And therefore the work of mission is exciting, not daunting, because it's the Spirit who empowers us for it. He gives us courage, perhaps, to do things we'd never normally consider, like hosting one of these dialogue suppers that many of us have been involved with in the last month or so.

[20:40] Because by doing so, by engaging, we are engaging in the mission of Jesus, we are involved in his work, and we'll never know what he will do in the lives of those we come across.

So then, what does it mean to live by the Spirit? Well, it's to be engaged in the mission of Jesus, and it's to be empowered for the mission of Jesus. Now, I want to spend our last few minutes, if I may, just drawing together some of the things we've been looking at over the last four weeks in this series on the Spirit, and thinking about what it might mean to experience the Spirit.

When Christians talk about the Holy Spirit, it can often seem vague, or perhaps even a bit spooky to some, but we've seen, haven't we, over these last four weeks, that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God.

He is fully God, just like God the Father, and God the Son, Jesus Christ, He is fully God. And we've seen above all that the work of the Spirit is to do the work of Jesus. We've seen that the Spirit brings the very presence of Jesus himself to his people.

We've seen that he brings the very words of Jesus to his people. We've seen that he convicts the world of its need for the rescue that Jesus offers. and now this week that he enables his people to be engaged in the work of mission, to be engaged in Jesus' mission.

[22 : 10] Now, all too often, I think, Christians don't always think of the work of the Spirit in these terms, in terms of the work of Jesus. So, for example, we ask the question, well, what is the Spirit like?

Which suggests that he is some sort of impersonal force or power. A much better question is to ask, who is he like? And he is like Jesus.

His agenda is Jesus' agenda. He doesn't have some other agenda. Again, too often, I think, we often relate the work of the Spirit to my needs, and the result is a view of the Spirit's work that is man-centered, that sort of focuses around me.

And not around Jesus. But no, he is the Spirit of Jesus. It's why rightly Christians talk about the floodlight ministry of the Spirit.

I don't know if you've come across that term, but people often talk about the floodlight ministry of the Spirit. A few weeks ago, Rachel and I spent part of an evening wandering around the South Bank.

[23 : 14] It was a wonderful evening, and it's great seeing all these huge monuments, St. Paul's Cathedral, or the Tate Modern, beautifully floodlit and lit up at night.

And the whole of the River Thames seems to be floodlit at night, doesn't it? And of course, the great trick about good floodlighting is that you barely notice the lights themselves, as they're concealed in the ground or behind bushes or whatever it is.

Rather, their whole purpose is to draw your eye up to whatever it is that's being floodlit. the effect is to make visible what otherwise would not be seen, and to maximise the dignity and to throw everything into wonderful relief, the things you couldn't normally see.

Well, it's a good illustration of the role of the Spirit as he floodlights, so to speak, Jesus Christ and who he is. So then, what might it look like to experience the Spirit at work in the Church and also in our own lives?

Well, historically, Christians have often made the mistake of equating the work of the Spirit with things which perhaps are sort of out of the ordinary, or perhaps with things which we find rather difficult to understand, making the assumption perhaps that because here is something weird and perhaps slightly odd, it must be the work of the Spirit.

[24 : 37] the Spirit, but no, the Spirit does the work of Jesus. And of course, the unframed eye, that may look very ordinary, but we're to be in no mistake that it is miraculous nonetheless.

For example, when someone comes to put their trust in Jesus Christ, is that not an extraordinary miracle? When someone who by nature rejects God's rule in their life, when they begin perhaps to read the Bible, when they come face to face with Jesus, when they come to put their trust in Christ and their rejection of God is turned into a love of God, however weak that love is, is that not an extraordinary miracle?

Yes, to the casual observer, it's a work which initially perhaps may be invisible, although of course, over time, as their life is transformed, it will be all too visible.

Or think of the Christian at work. There's someone I know who in her office, she put up posters advertising a lunchtime service which is presenting the claims of Jesus Christ to those in the workplace.

The next day the poster was taken down, so she put up another, that was then taken down, that's kind of carried on for a number of weeks. Eventually she decides to email her colleagues to invite them along to the lunchtime service.

[26 : 05] Now, again, that sort of thing doesn't look, does it particularly impressive or powerful, but I take it it is powerful, as out of the conviction that God by his Holy Spirit is dwelling within her, so she is acting.

As out of the conviction that it's the Spirit who empowers her for the mission of Jesus in the office, why she is acting, empowered by the Spirit to do so.

It seems to me it's a miracle when someone has that perspective on the world of work, when all that so often counts in the world of work is making money and climbing up the career ladder.

So the Spirit-filled life won't always be an easy life, but I take it will be a confident life, confident that the risen Jesus dwells within us, confident the Bible is God speaking to us, and I take it to you it will be a purposeful life, engaged in the mission of Jesus, trusting the Spirit's power to convict the world of its need for forgiveness and the rescue that Jesus offers.

Well, as we sit, let's pray together, shall we? Jesus said to them again, peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

[27 : 35] Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for the Lord Jesus Christ, how you sent him to reveal yourself to us so that we can know what God is like, and also to bring about your rescue, the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus. And thank you, Heavenly Father, therefore, for the enormous privilege Christians have today of being engaged in that same mission of Jesus, given the task of revealing Jesus to others and proclaiming the message of Jesus to others.

Thank you that the Spirit is the one who not only engages us in that, but empowers us for it. And we pray that we would be those who who, in humble dependence upon you, nonetheless would be engaged in that same mission, in confidence, knowing that this is the work the Spirit does in us. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.