We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life
The Nicene Creed

It has been suggested that the story of God starts in the wrong place. We begin, expansively, with God the Father Almighty. We go on to God the Son, about whom - naturally - we can say a great deal. But then we come to God the Holy Spirit and our words seem to peter out.

The New Testament takes the opposite approach. We come to know the Father only through the Son. And we come to know the Son through our experience of the Holy Spirit.

Most Christians know that experience. Most of us come to a living faith having first been attracted by the experience of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people we know. We are then able to see Jesus in a different light. And finally, usually much later, we grow to know and experience the love of our Parent God.

A window to God

To better understand this we need to do some old fashioned Bible Study.

The Hebrews believed that God could make himself present by causing his Spirit to empower particular people so that they became ‘windows’ through which God’s purpose could be seen. In this way God’s Spirit empowered Joseph (see Genesis 41:38f), Joshua (see Numbers 27:18), and Samson (see Judges 14:6f). In this way, too, ‘He has spoken through the Prophets’.

In the New Testament God’s Spirit was given to Mary (see Luke 1:35) and to Simeon (see Luke 2:25) so that they became ‘windows’ of God’s purpose.

Jesus himself was anointed with the Spirit at his baptism (see Luke 3:22). He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and he ‘returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee’ (Luke 4:14).

There, in Nazareth, his home town, he went to the Synagogue where he was invited to read the lesson. He chose the words of Isaiah 61: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord’.

‘Today’, he said, ‘this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ Luke 4:14f

Jesus was anointed with the Spirit of God so that he became a ‘window’ through which men and women could see God.

The Paraclete

Saint John didn’t speak of windows. He used another image. He called the Spirit the Paraclete which is translated in our scriptures as ‘Counsellor’ or ‘Helper’.

The Greek word paracletos means ‘one who is called in to give aid’. In everyday Greek, the paraclete was the head of a clan or a family who was bound to stand by his dependants to defend them and support them.

During his lifetime Jesus was the paraclete to his disciples but, as his crucifixion drew near he realised that they would need another paraclete. He assured them: ‘I will pray to the Father and he will give you another paraclete who will be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.’ John 14:16

Jesus said this ‘other paraclete’ would teach them and help them to recall all that he had taught them; he would be sent by Jesus from the Father (see John 15:26); he would not come until Jesus had gone away (see John 16:5-11); and he would ultimately guide the disciples into all truth (see John 16:12-15).

It was in expectation of this promise that the disciples were waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

The Spirit and the Church

‘When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began
to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." Acts 2:1-4

Again, in Chapter 10 of Acts, Peter is called by the Spirit to go and preach to a non-Jewish assembly in Caesarea. While Peter was still preaching, ‘... the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the Jews who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking with tongues and extolling God.’ Acts 10:44-46

We should note that on both these occasions the Holy Spirit was given, not just to individuals, but to the whole assembly. And we should note that this collective outpouring of the Spirit took place on only two occasions.

First it was given to the Jewish disciples on the day of Pentecost. Then it was given to the Gentile assembly at Caesarea.

From that time on the Spirit was given only to new converts and only when they joined the Church by baptism with the laying on of hands.

The New Testament message is plain. The Spirit is the life energy of the Church. The Spirit is the Church’s source of life.

The Spirit guides the Church into truth and gives the Church gifts for ministry. And it cannot be emphasised enough that these gifts are bestowed on the Church, in the Church, and for the ministry of the Church. They are never given to individuals for personal gain or selfish display. They are gifts for ministry.

The gifts of the Spirit

The gifts the Spirit gives to the Church are many and varied.

Saint Paul says they include wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophesy, discernment, speaking in tongues, the interpretation of tongues, apostleship, teaching, helping, administration, (see 1 Corinthians 12:8-10) service, exhortation, generous giving, acting mercifully, leading, (see Romans 12:6-8) evangelizing, pastoring, (see Ephesians 4:11) and that list only scratches the surface.

The gifts are given to the Church, the community of the Spirit, and the Church confirms those gifts on its members. Every Christian has at least one gift for service and ministry. And every Christian has a responsibility to use that gift in God’s service.

We will say more about this later. Right now we need to close off the story of God by saying something about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Trinity

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity doesn’t make sense but it does stand to reason. It is a revealed truth, a truth which grew out of the experience of the Church, and to understand the problem we need to do a little more Bible Study.

We are faced with these facts:

1. The God revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures is One God.

The Creed of the Jewish Church is contained in the words, ‘Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’. Deuteronomy 6:4

2. This basic truth was reaffirmed by Jesus (see Mark 12:29) but his disciples became convinced that, in Jesus, they saw God. When Thomas came face to face with the Risen Lord he exclaimed, ‘My Lord and my God!’ a title which Jesus accepted with the words; ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe’.

John 20:28-29

3. But Jesus also spoke of the Holy Spirit who ‘proceeded from the Father’ but who was distinct from himself. He said, ‘...when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me’. John 15:26

4. Then we have the witness of the early Church. The first Christians were Jews who worshipped the Father as One God. But they placed Jesus alongside the Father while at the same time they witnessed to the power of the Holy Spirit who had come upon the Church at Pentecost.

Their belief in God - Father, Son and Spirit - is seen in this passage from Scripture: ‘By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world.’ 1 John 4:13-14

All these individual facts make good sense until we try to put them together. Then we run up against the limitations of our language.

Our language naturally has a close association with our normal, everyday, experience. And there is probably no way we can describe, in everyday language, truths that are beyond our everyday experience.

And there lies our problem with the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In everyday terms, it doesn’t make sense. Yet it is a truth which has been revealed to the Church and which is a fact of our Christian experience.