

7th Sunday (C)

23rd February 2025

'Nicene Creed VI: Holy Spirit (CCC 683–747)'

1Sam 26: *'I would not raise my hand'*

Ps 102: *He does not treat us according to our sins*

1Cor 15: *we will be modelled on the heavenly man*

Lk 6: 27–38: *Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you*

The clear message of today's Scripture readings is that of forgiveness: *deep and exacting and life-changing forgiveness*, perhaps taking us to lengths of mercy that we might not have felt we had in us. In the 1st Reading David, not yet King, is exemplary in His peace-making. Saul is so jealous of David's popularity and is pursuing him to kill him, but even when David has this opportunity to kill Saul, he doesn't take it: he doesn't want vengeance, he wants peace, with Saul alive, and he knows that peace is better achieved by compassion than by further violence.

Then there are Jesus's powerful words in the Gospel this morning/evening in Lk 6 (an abridged version of the *Sermon on the Mount*, Mt 5–7). To give us real focus we might just listen again to those opening words: *"I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you"* (6:27–28). It's incredibly direct, practical, and

relevant advice for our human relationships, to counter our regular failures in treating one another well. Jesus urges us to love and forgive our enemies — just as He loved and forgave His enemies, the ones who had Him crucified: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do*. Jesus can do it, but can we? Can we seriously be expected to love those who are always difficult to us, those who make our life a misery? Well, Jesus obviously thinks we can, otherwise He wouldn't command it. But how can we ever begin to take up Jesus's spiritual challenges, His urging us to lengths that seem beyond us, super-human goodness and sacrificial charity? We can only ever do so by the grace of the Holy Spirit at work within us. It is the *Holy Spirit* that we are considering this week in our theological journey through the Nicene Creed ...

In the past few weeks we have looked at the Creed's articles about *God the Son*. In Jesus, born as true man, we see God made visible. That is the point of His coming, so that we can truly know of God directly, by seeing Him and hearing Him. The Father, and the Holy Spirit, remain

unseen, but the testimony that Jesus gives is that the Father and the Holy Spirit are truly God; God just as much as He Himself is God. Jesus speaks of the Father, the One who sends Him; and He speaks of the Holy Spirit, the One whom Father and Son will send upon the Church after the ministry of Jesus has run its course. It is because of what Jesus taught us that we know that God is three in one: a Trinity. It is because of Jesus's promise to send Him that we know of the Holy Spirit.

The third section of the Creed that we are now considering covers the Holy Spirit and the Church. It begins, as we recite each Sunday: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.* Now, in point of fact, the Nicene Creed itself (at Nicaea, 325AD) had far less text than that — it limited itself to: *And in the Holy Spirit.* That was it. It was left to the next great Council, Constantinople I, in 381AD, to expand greatly on this paragraph, into the form we know.

A lot of agony was spent in the early Church — in fact, right from the 4th through to the 11th c. — working out exactly how to describe the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son. Just as followers of the Arian heresy had denied the full divinity of the Son of God, so also there were heretical opinions after Nicaea, in the mid-4th c., questioning the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. St Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria 328–373AD, a giant amongst theologians, was a key defender of the Spirit's full divinity, much as he had been the scourge of the Arian heresy. In fact, one might say he took the same approach, insisting that the only (theo-)logically consistent position was that the Spirit is *ὁμοούσιος* with the Father as well as is the Son. Both are “of one being/substance” with the Father — both are fully and equally God, with the Father. A trio of three other 4th-c. theologians in the East, the Cappadocian Fathers — Basil the Great, his brother, Gregory of Nyssa, and close friend Gregory Nazianzen — then developed these same ideas, considering the Trinity of divine persons and their co-relation, clarifying the

Church's Greek vocabulary with regard to 'nature' and 'persons.' Though St Athanasius had died by the 1st Council of Constantinople, and so had St Basil, yet the two Sts Gregory were there — Gregory of Nazienzen being the patriarch of the city hosting the Council — and they brought their learning and insights to the words that make up our Creed's subtle text on the most-Holy Spirit. The word "Lord" which is specifically used for God Himself, and the phrase "with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified" (*simul adoratur et conglorificatur*, it says in the Latin) is equally clear, whilst employing language that was thoroughly Scriptural. It was a middle path, I suppose, not using overly technical language which could be the cause of further fractious debate, but drawing the clear inference of the Spirit's through-and-through divinity. We owe so much to the clarity of thought of those Greek Fathers, St Athanasius, St Basil and the two Sts Gregory, guiding the Church's decisions on the Creed.

Taking our cue from this, we can note that all sorts of images have been offered for Holy Spirit in the

Scriptures, and many different ways of representing the action of the Spirit: there are images of fire, of cloud, of wind, of breath, of water, of light, and the dove ... All these lovely ways of describing the Holy Spirit are grasping at the fact that the Holy Spirit brings *life* ... brings things spiritually 'to life.' The Holy Spirit is the love and the power of God: He is "*the Lord, the Giver of Life,*" as the Creed says. Living water, Breath of Life, Warming and Passionate Fire ... the Holy Spirit communicates the Life of God, the Love of God, to us as human beings. One of the loveliest ways of thinking about the Holy Spirit — and which was a favourite image of St Augustine in the Latin Church — is to consider Him as *the love between Father and Son*: the Holy Spirit is that infinite and passionate love within the Godhead; love that is not just inward looking, but that is poured out also into what is *not* God: lavished, that is, on creation. The Bible says, on its very first page, that "the Spirit hovered over the waters": God from the beginning was filling the earth with His love, giving the universe the power of His creative

love, to have life.

So, whilst we do not *see* the Spirit, as we can see God the Son — Jesus the baby in the manger, Jesus the man on the Cross — yet we know that the Spirit is active and life-giving. We would not *be* Christians without the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit of God who inspires us to believe; it is the Holy Spirit who inhabits us through grace beginning with Baptism; it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the courage to persevere with belief, and with charity, even when it is hard. It is the Holy Spirit who has given guidance to the Church, strength to the martyrs; it is the Holy Spirit who is the creative divine power within the Sacraments ... “*let Your Holy Spirit come down upon these offerings, that they may become the Body & Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ*” are the operative words as we enter the most sacred moment of the Mass! He is the loving communication of God, making God present in our very midst; the same powerful God who overshadowed Mary, so she conceived the baby Jesus within her. He comes into our hearts too to make us able to live active Christian lives:

He is the grace that makes us holy. It is through the Spirit we have been brought to know Jesus the Lord, to receive His great gift of the Spirit, because it is only through the Spirit that we can ever live a life of goodness and holiness, a life pleasing to God.

We began with considering the huge challenge of being able to live the commandments of Jesus such as loving our enemies, forgiving wrongs, praying for those who do not wish us good or even do us harm. How can we ever do so, how can we ever live up to the standards of Christian love modelled for us by Christ? — Only by the gift of the *Spirit*, the divine Spirit transforming our hearts into copies of Jesus’s heart, loving & forgiving. Do you ask for the Spirit, *long* for His life-giving, life-changing indwelling? How can we actually have any chance of living the Gospel without *appealing* for that divine help, that divine person, the blessed Spirit He so longs to give:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your faithful and kindle in them the fire of Your love. Send forth Your Spirit, and they shall be created, and You will renew the face of the earth.