

Openness - Practices that let the light in (Examen)

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

Date: 5 June 2022, Pentecost

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 27; John 14:15-27; Galatians 5:16-25; (Ephesians 3:14-19)

Today is the day of Pentecost. It's 50 days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It's 10 days after his ascension into heaven where he is reigning at the Father's right hand. Today we come to the third person of the Holy Trinity, the Spirit. Before his ascension Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the gift promised by the Father, the Holy Spirit. On that first day of Pentecost, the Father poured out the Spirit on Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem. The apostle Peter said that the Holy Spirit is not only for those first disciples, but for all whom God calls, all those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith. This morning we're going to consider the person and work of the Holy Spirit

We're also in a sermon series called Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life. We're working through the acronym WORSHIP, and today we're up to O - Openness: Practices that let the light in. It is in fact through the power of the Holy Spirit that we commune with God, and through the power of the Spirit that we are transformed. The particular practice or spiritual habit that we'll explore today is the Examen.

A word to those of you who are here and wouldn't call yourselves Christians. The Holy Spirit is key to the Christian faith. I have a lot of conversations with people about what Christians believe and about how to live a good life. But without the Spirit, all Christian teaching is just empty ideas and rules. It's dead. The Spirit is God's presence and power. He is God at work in this world, moving amongst us, even in our hearts. He is the breath of life, the wind that moves us, the fire that transforms us, the love that enfolds us. Sometimes he shows up in extraordinary ways, but mostly he is a still small voice, whispering gently, moving unseen. His invitation is for you to pay attention. He is here with us right now. He speaks through the pages of Scripture. I'm always conscious that when I speak I do so in his presence and I want to honour him. But as I speak I'm praying that he would be the one each one of us hear, that he would unblock our ears, open our eyes and soften our hearts so that we would taste God's love and be transformed.

It's in and through and by the Holy Spirit that we commune with God and that we're transformed. Let's have a look at each of those in turn.

Communing with God.

In John 14 Jesus says that he won't leave us as orphans but will ask the Father to give us the Spirit. He says that for those who love him and keep his commands, *My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*¹

How is that we will not be orphans? Because Jesus and Father will come and make our home with us. How do the Father and the Son do this? By the Spirit, the gift of the Father. The Spirit is in fact the presence of God with us. He is our advocate and help. He will be with us forever.

In Romans 8, in the space of a few words, Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as *the Spirit, the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of Christ*, and then even, Christ.² That is to say the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, such that where he is, so the Father and the Son are also. And where does Paul say he is? *In you, living in you*, that is in those who believe. This is why in 1 Corinthians Paul says that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit.³ This is the incredible dignity that God bestows upon you. Even you, with all the imperfections of your failing body that you see in the mirror, nothing less than a temple where the true and living God who made you and loves you delights to dwell.

Paul goes on to pick up Jesus' promise that he will not leave us as orphans.

*For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ... the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*⁴

God gives his Spirit to all those who trust in Christ. It is through the Spirit that we're adopted as God's children. The Holy Spirit speaks to our spirit, that is he speaks to us on the deepest level, that we are children of God.

This truth, that in Christ we are God's children, holy and dearly loved, is, quite frankly, impossible for us to grasp. I suspect, like me, that is your experience. We hear the words of others and our own hearts rising up to attack and condemn us. "You're not worthy. You're no good. You're done too much. God couldn't possibly love you." And this is why Paul prays for power in Ephesians 3.

I pray that out of his glorious riches [the Father] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and

¹ John 14.23-24

² Romans 8.9-10

³ 1 Corinthians 6:19

⁴ Romans 8.14-16

*high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*⁵

Our hearts are too small to contain the infinite God. We are not strong enough to grasp just how much God loves us. Our hands are too impure to touch the holy fire of his being.

When Isaiah had a vision of God he was undone and cried, “*Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.*” But then an angel took a burning coal from the altar with tongs and touched Isaiah’s mouth and said, “*See, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for.*”⁶ Christ offered himself as the sacrifice for sin upon the altar of the cross. He has atoned for our sins. But now it is not an angel, but the Holy Spirit himself, the burning coal of God’s holy presence, who comes and touches not our lips but our very hearts. And so Paul prays for Spirit’s power, the power that we need for Christ to live in our weak hearts. And he prays for the Spirit’s power that we might grasp the love of Christ and so be filled with all the fullness of God. We cannot take hold of that holy fire. Even the angels used tongs. Only the Spirit of God himself can. But he comes and makes his home in our hearts so that in his power we might know how high and wide and long and deep is his love for us.

Transformed by the Spirit

When you know that love, when you are touched by that fire, then your heart is warmed to love and obey him in return. Then the impurities of your life start to burn away. And so Paul can write in Galatians - *So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh ...*

19 *The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

22 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*⁷ This is the Spirit’s work to transform us, to grow in us that fruit. It is as we commune with God by the Spirit that then he will transform us to be like Christ, to shine his light and life.

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⁵ Ephesians 3.16-19

⁶ Isaiah 6.5-7

⁷ Galatians 5.16-25

Ok, so I got a little carried away meditating on the person of the Spirit, the living fire of God's presence. Let's get more practical. It is this Spirit who is always there, gently at work, if only we would notice him. Our focus today is on Openness. Practices that let the light in. Psalm 27 speaks of a life that is open to God. David says the singular focus of his life is to be in God's presence. It is the deepest longing of his heart. He does not let the turmoil of life around him, threats from without and anxieties within, get in the way, or crowd God out. He comes back again and again to God.

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"

Your face, Lord, I will seek.

The fruit of this search is a rich feast.

10 Though my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will receive me.

I remain confident of this:

I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.

14 Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.

Your face, Lord, I will seek. That is to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. How can we seek the face of the Lord? What can we do? There is of course prayer itself. And in a sense all spiritual disciplines are forms of prayer. What I wanted to look at today is a discipline called the Examen.

What is the Examen?

The examen is a practice that invites us to reflect on our days prayerfully in the presence of God. I'm going to talk about it as something to do at the end of each day, but you can also do a weekly examen, a monthly examen, at different seasons and each year. At the end of the day, before you go to bed, maybe in a comfy chair or before you switch off the light, take a moment for prayer. Begin by welcoming God's presence and inviting the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to lead you into his truth. Then you come to the examen proper. Basically it is two questions that can be asked in different forms. What am I grateful for today? What was hard today? Or what was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of the day? Or where was I living out the fruit of the Spirit? Where was there an absence of the fruit of the Spirit? Spend some time reflecting on these 2 questions. Those things for which you are grateful, well thank God for them! This is where God has shown up in your day. Thank him for his gifts.

Those things which were life thwarting, well you can ask, how did I respond to them? Why did I react that way? What am I holding on to that I need to let go of so that I can display the fruit of the Spirit that situation called for? What do I need to confess? For example, sometimes I get frustrated when kids don't do what I've asked and I snap at them. But my impatience is more about my desire to be in control and my own frustrations about not getting through enough of my to do list. I have to confess and ask God to give me patience, to help me be self controlled and kind and gentle.

The examen is a way to notice where the Spirit is at work through the day. As you pray the examen each night, your spiritual senses become more attuned to where God is at work. You begin to notice the Spirit more throughout the day. You may stop and give thanks or pray as you notice the Spirit in the day. A few weeks ago I was out of sorts in the morning trying to focus my scattered mind when I got a message. A man had come to church and wanted to go inside. I ended up popping over and I sat for an hour listening to his story and then praying for him. Afterwards I realised that the Spirit had wanted me to be available for him. The examen is also a simple way to teach your kids to be open to the presence of God. When you pray with your kids at night, (we try to make it our practice but don't always manage. But we keep working on it because God loves us to come to him). Anyway, when you pray with your kids at night, you can ask them to say what they are thankful for in the day, and maybe what was hard in the day, and then you can pray about those things. "Dear Father thank you for ... Dear Father, this was hard, thank you that you're with me."

The examen is also a great way to pay attention to your own heart. To notice how you're wired. To see patterns of thought and behaviour. To see where you're living according to the flesh, to use Paul's words. To notice where you need to repent, what you need to hand over to God so you can walk in step with the Spirit.

Finally the examen is a way to end your day in prayer. When you come to bed the events and conversations of the day can be buzzing around your head. The examen is a way to pray through your day and to hand it over to God so that you can rest in peace. You can finish the examen with a prayer. Psalm 4 is a Psalm designed to be read at the end of the day. It finishes with these words which you might like to pray.

In peace I will lie down and sleep, for your alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Or you could pray the prayer for the evening from the Book of Common Prayer.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray: and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of your only Son our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.