

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 104
Matthew 3:1-12
Spirit as Fire

ForeWord

High spirits

Our little Monday Morning at the Movies cinema group met last week to see *The Edge of Life*. If you only see one movie per month for a quarter or per year, this is probably one you could afford to miss.

The movie is a documentary concerned with the state of mind of people who have a terminal illness diagnosis, and the possibilities of prescription psychedelic drugs to assist them in their emotional health after such news.

The state of mind of people with such diagnoses is, of course, very often greatly disturbed. And so thinking about how best to assist people in these circumstances must be of the highest order of priority.

And psychedelic drugs sound like they can be pretty good fun, which would surely help at such a distressing time.

Both the experience of knowing how close our death might be and the impact that such drugs might have on our well-being are surely things to be studied closely. But, to me, the most interesting thing about the documentary was the way it interpreted what the drug did for those who have such difficult news to negotiate.

Because the drug has a psychological effect, with various visions and felt impressions, the language of “spiritual” was invoked to interpret the experience of these dying people. The drug, it was proposed, connects us to something deeper, perhaps, or to a different, spiritual dimension. This was reinforced by crossovers to indigenous cultures in South America, where drugs with similar kinds of effects are routinely taken as part of what is called their spirituality.

Certainly, the illness suffered by the various patients is very real, and we have no reason to doubt their testimony as to what they said they saw in their psychedelic trances, but this is quite different from making connections between their experience and any “reality”. Why should what we experience when lying down on a comfortable bed, wearing noise-cancelling headphones and under the influence of a drug that alters perception – why should what we experience there be any more “real” than the world in which we usually live?

And yet, for no particular reason, the assumption behind the presentation of these various experiences in the documentary was that what happens inside minds loosened up by psychedelics is more real than what happens in our here-and-now world. Such experiences might well be more comforting, but this isn’t the same as it being more real, even if we call this reality a “spiritual” one.

Disturbing spirit

At one level, perhaps, none of this immediately matters: the interest in the use of the drugs was the same as the use of all drugs: to alleviate suffering, which it seemed to do.

And it would be fine if we left it at that. But the invocation of a notion of “spirituality” connected to this experience touches upon what we do when we gather like this. And this led me to consider again something you’ve heard me say [several times](#) over the years: “spirit” is the second most useless word the church has in its faith vocabulary.

Like all of our god-words, “spirit” is a borrowed word. It has meanings beyond what it might mean, for example, in the church. And we easily succumb to the temptation to jump from one place to another, taking the meaning from the first place to the next, as if the meaning stays the same. “Spirit”, of course, *is* a church word and so, to that extent, the church is interested in “spirituality”. But words take their meaning not from some internal, fixed notion but from an informing grammar the word takes from its context. And so spirit is not always what we think it is.

In the case of the movies, “spirituality” is a human thing conventional medicine can’t yet measure, a kind of “opposite”, then, of medical science. And so it becomes there a kind of mystical catch-all. Add to this that these unfortunate people are trying to negotiate hard news about the end of life, and “religion” kicks in – the third most useless word the church has.

So, with those thoughts about spirit in mind, we come to our Gospel reading today which, as is the case each Second Sunday of Advent, features the preaching of John the Baptist. The Baptist comes as the forerunner, the herald of Jesus. But more than just announcing that Jesus is coming, the Baptist also announces what Jesus will do. Let’s listen, then, to what it is that John says Jesus comes to do, and this in particular with reference to “spirit”

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: Matthew 3.1-12)

Word: Proclamation

Cleansing spirit

Who John is and what he is doing is of great interest to everyone, and so they stream out to see and to hear. John’s role, however, is not to be noticed but rather to point to Jesus. And he characterises what Jesus will do by contrasting Jesus’ work with his own: “I baptise you with water for repentance”, John declares, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

This always surprises me – that, in view of all that Jesus does and is said to be in the Gospels, this is the summary statement the (synoptic) Evangelists make of his ministry. Matthew, Mark and Luke each begin their Gospel with this characterisation of Jesus’ ministry: Jesus is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (to which Matthew and Luke add, “and fire”).

Here we have an idea about Spirit – about spirituality even. And what does it have to do with the warm spirituality that comes with noise-cancelling headphones and psychedelic drugs? We might suspect, “Not a lot”. There surely is a place for quiet, for withdrawal – for the spirituality of the Sabbath, perhaps. But the Sabbath is only one day in seven. What has spirituality to do with the other six days? It is these days that Jesus comes to address.

Recall what we said last week about apocalyptic thought. This arose from the very pressing existential and political question: How can such things be happening? Where on earth is God? And it is, as such, a “spiritual” question. But it was not asked as a prelude to a retreat from the world, in order to find God; the apocalyptic mind didn’t expect to have to go anywhere. The expectation was that *God* would come *into the world*, into the midst of everything. And so apocalyptic thought was an urgent prayer:

Come! The later texts in the prophet Isaiah verge on apocalyptic urgency: “You who remind the Lord, take no rest, and give God no rest until Jerusalem is re-established... (Isaiah 62.7)”.

This is spirituality, but now it has to do with the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the times in which we live, the shape of our lives together (German *Zeitgeist*: time-spirit) – and with the whole of that time and life. But as a spirituality of the whole of our time, it doesn’t propose that God will be sitting around somewhere, that God will become a visible, tangible thing in the world like everything else we see and touch. It proposes the world not as *containing* God, but as becoming the *glory* of God.

Human spirit

And what does that mean?

The glory of God, one of the old saints declared, is the human being fully alive. And what does “fully alive” mean? It means something like what Jesus looked like. He baptises with the Holy Spirit because he himself lives in that spirit. And so everything he does is spiritual: the teaching of the people, the arguments with the authorities, the exhaustion after a long, hot day, quiet Sabbaths with his friends, the emerging possibility of his being crucified – surely a terminal diagnosis – and his very dying on a cross. This spirituality is not always comfortable, but when did “spiritual” come to mean “comfortable” in its usual, thin sense?

The spirit to which John points – the Holy Spirit – is a spirit which burns away what is not real, what denies life as distraction or hidden power. Spirit is already everywhere, long before we realise we’re going to die, and so spirituality as escape is not only active in the taking of drugs to ease our troubled minds. It’s there also in drinking ourselves stupid, in weekends lost to unplanned binge-watching, in sexual gratification through porn, comfort chocolate and retail therapy. These are all spirituality as oppression and avoidance.

And, as appealing and fleetingly comfortable as the spirituality of withdrawal usually is, it’s a sign that we are not exactly human beings fully alive.

We know this, I suppose – that we are not fully alive. But the gospel point is that it’s into the normal, troubled humdrum-ness of life that the Holy Spirit is given. And so the apocalyptic vision was not of withdrawn, disembodied, disengaged souls. The vision was of a city – a living, bustling place. We cannot imagine this: that heaven could be bustle – a city with sirens and sewers. We cannot imagine “your kingdom come”, earth as heaven.

But this is the proposal of the gospel, a different kind of Spirit, manifest in the glory of God in the face of one of us, Jesus of Nazareth.

We cannot imagine this. But surely, we want it. We want not to live under the shadow of death and his many friends. We want that the glory of God be manifest in us, in our faces: a light shining and burning as promise of life, even here, even now.

And so we pray with the wild-eyed, apocalyptic prophet and with the church ever since: come, Holy Spirit, come fire, and make us whole.

And all God’s people say...
