

**Creatures of the Spirit**  
**Luke 2: 22-40**  
**Candlemas 2010**

Looking back on their career as a group, the producer of many of the Beatles albums put their success and popularity down to more than just the music. They had, he said, that elusive quality charisma. People felt better about themselves, and about their lives, just by being in their presence. Often people would reach out and touch them, as though they hoped that something of that life giving spirit would flow into them, like a kind of existential electricity.

Every now and then we too meet people whose personal attractiveness makes a deep impression on us. Where did these gifts of personality come from, we might be tempted to ask? Often it can't be explained by just the influence of family, education or general background. Somehow when the gifts were being given out they were fortunate enough to receive these qualities of emotional generosity, personal charm, of intuitive social skills, and of immense self-confidence. My way of making sense of it is to think of them as having a small portion of spirit, a minute measure of that joy of heart and radiance of spirit that goes on inside God all the time.

For over a month now we have been hearing about the origins and development of the most attractive personality who ever lived. The recorded incidents from his growing up years are sparse. But there is a common thread running through them. A number of the significant people he comes in to contact with are alive with the spirit of God. Three times Simeon the priest is described in this way – “the Holy Spirit rested on him” – “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit” – “Prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple.” The Holy Spirit has kept Simeon on the boil through a long life, has kept him full of expectant faith and hope, patiently and confidently waiting for just this moment to come along. It is the Holy Spirit that has got him to the right place at the right time to meet the holy family. It is the Holy Spirit that has given him the discernment to recognise that this baby, out of all the others that he has had professional dealings with, is the significant one, the expected one. We might recall also that this language of Spirit in filling has been used also about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist so far. And of course the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in the womb of his mother the Virgin Mary.

Indeed Luke will present the adult Jesus to us as, what Walter Kasper calls, a creature of the Spirit. The inaugural act of his ministry will be his baptism in the river Jordan at which the Spirit of God will in fill him so as to enable him to be brimming over with words of wisdom and deeds of power.

In our world there are many siren voices calling to us for attention. Usually they are entertainers, advertisers, politicians, even religious entrepreneurs – who want to charm us, to impress us, and to recruit us. The ability to generate charisma, to come across as personally impressive, is something of a studied art form. “Pay attention to me” – “Come follow me” – is the by line of these seductive appeals. Often what is on offer here is a triumph of style over substance. Often those who polished their image in this way have also allowed their egos to become greatly inflated. There are great spiritual dangers that accompany being a charismatic individual.

We might notice that what makes Simeon attractive is his humility. “Lord now lettest thy servant depart in peace,” means, “I have had my brief moment in the limelight, for just an instant I was at the centre of God’s plans for the world, now it is time for me to step back into the shadows, and to get off the stage.” Being filled with the Spirit didn’t make him drunk with spiritual power. Rather it deflated his sense of ego. It gave him the grace to gratefully accept his small and appropriate place in the scheme of things.

This gift of discernment is one, which we very much need in a world of many different spirits. “The Spirit of truth lead you in to all truth,” – yes this spirit of wise choice is a God given blessing that protects us from giving our loyalty to snake oil merchants who do not have our best interests at heart. “May the eyes of your mind be enlightened” – yes, we need this ability to read people accurately, and to sense what ideas will bring life. Good judgement, a shrewd common sense, the ability to sift out the false and to locate what is genuine; these too are signs that the Spirit is with us. When this maturity of judgement grows and develops within us we are unlikely to be lead astray by charismatic and charming individuals who do not wish us well.

Our vocation is to be creatures of the spirit also, to be all that we can be as serious Christians, within our particular limitations. Reading Luke we might get the impression that spectacular signs and wonders always accompany being visited by the Spirit. While it is true that Luke is rather fond of this kind of outward manifestation of the Spirit’s presence, that isn’t the only way we know and show that God’s empowering presence is with us. Often and usually it is about carrying out acts of service in which we carry out God’s work in the world by being reliable, consistent, kind and quietly effective. As one commentator put it – the Holy Spirit enables us to do the ordinary in an extraordinary way.

It would be unhelpful also to get the impression from Luke’s interest in spectacular, supernatural visitations of the Spirit that the Spirit comes and goes like an unreliable and unpredictable electricity supply. The Holy Spirit that came in to our lives at baptism is a constant presence, a steady influence. If this was a staccato kind of

Spirit connection the Church would be left adrift in the in between times. But the truth is that its life is continually sustained by a wide variety of continuously active spiritual gifts widely distributed throughout the life of each congregation, each diocese, and of each national church.

And it is a personal Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus reaching out to enhance the personal reality of each one of us. It is not an impersonal Spirit, a kind of blind electric current that occasionally takes us over into a trance state that extinguishes our individual identity. That was the kind of behaviour that went on in pagan temples when devotees came looking for insider knowledge about what was going to happen next in their lives. This was Spirit possession, rather than being indwelt by the respectful, peaceable presence of the Christian God. The Spirit that Luke is keen to tell us about is a bridge that connects the Jesus who was known to his contemporaries in Galilee to all the generations of believers in every age. The Spirit makes him contemporaneous with all of us. We too are creatures of the Spirit.