I

‘Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you”. They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.’

Today’s Gospel reading tells the story of one of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. The disciples are gathered in Jerusalem when the risen Christ appears. It’s the first time in Luke’s Gospel that most of them have seen him, and it’s no wonder they’re afraid. Jesus tries to prove it’s him by pointing to his hands and feet, bearing the wounds of the nails. ‘Touch me,’ he says, ‘and see; for a ghost has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ Quite what form the risen Christ takes in these appearances is, and remains, a puzzle, a mystery. He seems to be both spirit and flesh. He can suddenly appear from nowhere and vanish again, and yet he can be touched and heard, as well as seen.

It’s the same with his other appearances. In Mark, Matthew and John, Jesus appears first to Mary of Magdala. In John’s version, Mary ‘saw Jesus standing there, but [strangely] did not recognise him.’ In these Gospels, Jesus then appears to the disciples, and in John’s famous account, Thomas is absent, and insists on seeing and touching Jesus for himself. Jesus reappears a week later, and this time Thomas is convinced. ‘My Lord and my God!’ he declares.

I don’t think we can find a way to explain entirely the mystery of these resurrection narratives. We are left with Jesus’ bodily form that’s not subject to ordinary, physical restrictions; and we are left with a form that is sometimes recognisable and sometimes not. The fact that this is inexplicable should not alarm us. We are dealing here with a unique event, and I think the best we can say is that first, Jesus has risen from the dead; second, it follows that he is therefore spirit not flesh; and third, that in order to convince
his disciples, Jesus adopts some kind of visible, audible, tangible form. They can know for a fact that he has risen from the dead because they can see it’s Jesus. They can touch his wounds and they can listen to his words.

II

This is all temporary, a period of forty days before the ascension, when, whether we talk of a triumphant ascent to the heavens, or of being enthroned at the right hand of the Father, the risen Christ passes from physical to spiritual, from visible to invisible. The incarnate and the post-resurrection semi-incarnate stages of Jesus’ existence are over, and a new phase is ready to begin.

That phase begins with Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. We know that story well. How the disciples are transformed into apostles, inspired and commissioned to go out into the world to preach the gospel and build the Church.

I want to suggest that there is a danger here that we see this as an entirely new stage, and the Holy Spirit as an entirely new – what? - being? concept? force? If we think about the Trinity we must think of the Holy Spirit as God - for God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the trouble with the Trinity is that our minds naturally focus on three rather than one. We tend to think not of one God, but of three separate beings: the Father, the creator; the Son, Jesus Christ, our saviour; and we think of the Holy Spirit as, well, we’re not quite sure – some divine energy, perhaps, or power that inspires our faith and mission.

Too little explored is the understanding that the Holy Spirit is in some sense at least the spirit of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ. Jesus gets too easily left behind at the ascension, as though his life and work are now history, over and done. But in the New Testament, Christ and Spirit are often so closely related that at times they are virtually interchangeable. ‘I will not leave you bereft,’ says Jesus in John’s Gospel; ‘I am coming back to you . . . because I live, you too will live’ (Jn. 14:18). And Paul writes, ‘If a man does not possess the Spirit of Christ, he is no Christian. But if Christ is dwelling within you . . .’ (Rom. 8:9f.). Elsewhere he says ‘the Spirit of Jesus Christ is given me for support’ (Phil. 1:19), and he explains that it’s the Spirit who enables us to cry ‘Abba!’, the Aramaic word for ‘father’ which Jesus uses for God (Rom. 8:15).
Christ continues to be experienced, continues to be present, active and alive, in and through his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is how Jesus comes to his followers, then and now. And doesn’t that fit our Christian experience? Doesn’t it make sense? When we feel faith-ful, when we feel inspired, don’t we experience this as Christ’s heart-warming, life-giving, presence - closer than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet? ! Isn’t this what’s meant by that slogan you see outside some churches, and even on car-stickers, ‘Jesus is alive today!’

Paul lists a number of fruits of the Spirit, those virtues that come from the Spirit’s presence in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, self-control. Well, aren’t these the very defining characteristics of Jesus in the Gospels?

I think that in her well-known words, the sixteenth century mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, was saying something very similar about the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the risen Christ:

‘Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body, Christ has no body now on earth but yours.’

Amen