

Pentecost Sunday the day on which we recall how the Holy Spirit was sent to the disciples. These men who knew of God the Father, had encountered Jesus now received the Holy Spirit. Today I want to think with us about this passage from Galatians and especially v25, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

In v16 Paul had encouraged the Christians in Galatia to live by the spirit or better to walk by the Spirit. In v18 of them being led by the Spirit and here, for those who live by the spirit, to keep in step or again better walk by the spirit. But what does it all mean? What was Paul saying to those early Christians?

Firstly there was a supposition,

that they were living by the Spirit. Paul was presuming that he was writing to those who were Christians. The people he was writing to had been made alive by the work of God the Holy Spirit. They had been, to use the terminology from John 3, born again, made alive to God. It probably had not happened in the dramatic way that we read of in Acts 2 but at some point possibly through the preaching of Paul they had heard the gospel message and that message had been, by the working of the Holy Spirit, the means of their coming to faith and beginning a new life with God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring people to life in God. You may remember the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter day and their words after Jesus had left them, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" That was the Holy Spirit taking the words of Jesus, of God, and bringing them to life and causing faith. John Wesley found his Emmaus Road in London on May 24th 1738. He tells us in his journal how, "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate St where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ. Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."

I hope for all of us the same is true that we do live by the Spirit, that he has brought us to new life in God. If not then let me encourage us to turn to God in prayer and to ask him to open you by his spirit to the wonders of his love. Get on your knees and beg God in his mercy to send the Holy Spirit to bring you to new life.

Secondly there is an expectation.

The expectation is that they will live according to who they are. Paul was writing to them as God's children and so to live by the Spirit was not just a passive thing but an active thing, to live by the Spirit or to walk by the Spirit that is active. They are actively to live according to their nature.

They were Christians and were to live as such. I live in a house not an igloo or tepee because I am not an Eskimo or American Indian. I walk on two legs not on my hands and knees because I'm a human being not a cat. It would be unnatural for me to live in these other ways. So, as a child of God, Paul calls me to live according to my new nature not my old.

The expectation of Paul was that as children of God they would live God's life and basically that means they would be holy. So in v16 walk by the spirit has the corollary "and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful flesh". To live by the Spirit means we reject what we know is wrong. That is what we see here in Gal 5:19-21.

Effectively what Paul was reminding them was that for them as Christians there were two ways in which they could live either God's way led by the Holy Spirit or the way of the world as they satisfied their very human desires. We often picture this kind of battle as if we have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. But Paul here is saying something different. He is saying that when we give in to temptation and follow the way of the flesh we are denying who we are. We are denying that we are children of God. Paul's expectation was that they and we would be who we are and to live or walk by the Spirit not by our own human desires.

So as you reflect on your own life what is it guiding principle, God through the Holy Spirit or your own desires?

There is a supposition there is an expectation and

thirdly there is an exhortation.

It is there in v25 let us keep in step with the Spirit. I wonder what comes to your mind as you hear that? What comes to my mind is a story from my childhood, which seems to be mentioned almost every time my brothers and I get together.

We were on holiday in a place called Happisburgh in Norfolk. Now it is famous because of the erosion of the shoreline and houses falling into the sea. Anyway we were on holiday and we had been naughty and as a punishment my Dad decided that we boys would have to go for a walk round the village. So he lined us up one behind the other and led us off round the village. We followed him and kept in line as we had been told.

When I read keep in step that's what comes to mind and it isn't far away from the meaning of the Greek word. That word has the idea of a military formation or a dance group. It means to walk in line, to be in line with. In this instance as Paul exhorts them and us to walk by the Spirit he is saying make every effort to walk along the path or according to the line which the Holy Spirit lays down.

Going back to v18 he speaks of being led by the Spirit and here is exhorting them and us to follow the way the Holy Spirit leads us.

So how does he lead us?

Well we have already seen the negative in that he leads us away from the temptations of the flesh. I was talking with Ralph the other day about his and Doris' recent trip to the States and the fact that so many people he saw were obese, including lots of children. As parents the responsibility is upon us not just to teach our children good behaviour but also good diets. We seek to help them to avoid the things that are bad for them like sweets and chips and so on and towards the things that are good for them like fruit and veg and so on. The Holy Spirit will lead us away from all that is bad for us and towards God and all that is good.

There is the positive if we keep in step with the Spirit he will "guide us into all truth" (John 16:13). That is he will lead us into the way of God so that we who are children of God live the life God wants us to.

So here comes the crunch, what was it that Paul was expecting those Christians to do to keep in step with the Spirit?

Can I suggest three things that come to my mind and if you think of others do mention them to me afterwards.

1. To keep in step we need to follow the leader.

I'm sure you've played follow the leader and you do that by watching carefully what the leader does. We keep in step by watching our leader who is Jesus so that we may follow him in every way. When we walk we follow the leader the guide. As we went round that seaside village we kept our eyes firmly fixed on Dad not daring to go in any other direction other than where he went.

As we read these verses I know we are told to keep in step with the Spirit his role is to point us to Jesus and ultimately it is Jesus who is our leader and guide and it is he whom we are following. As we walk through life we keep our eyes on Jesus.

Moment by moment as we walk through the day we are seeking to live for Jesus asking how he would have us live in this situation, how he would have us react to that person or event, what he would have us say to this comment or that remark. To keep in step with the Spirit is to follow Jesus in every way because we know him as saviour and Lord.

2. to keep in step with the Spirit we need to be sensitive to his leading

and ready to move as he leads. Some of us will be able to remember Lifeshapes and the Heptagon. There the idea was that there are seven signs which show whether something is alive or not and those are remembered by the acronym Mrs Gren.

The s stands for sensitivity. A plant is sensitive to light, a deer to sound, a dog to smell, your fingers to something that's hot. A living person is sensitive. Poke a dead body and it is not. To keep in step with the Spirit we need to be sensitive to his promptings. But are we? When God pokes you do you react? As he speaks through the word do you respond as his spirit nudges you? Are you alive to the Spirit prompting you through the word? Do you see and feel the joy or pains of others around you? There are many other ways in which the Spirit prompts us to live God's life. But of course it is not just a matter of being sensitive but as the M in Mrs Gren reminds us of moving. Movement in response to sensitivity is part of nature, your eyelids move at any danger to the face, you can't eat a doughnut without licking your lips. If we are sensitive to the Holy Spirit we should also be ready to move as he leads us.

So as we read the word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit he will open that word to us and we should be sensitive to it. He may encourage us, challenge us, rebuke or correct us. But be sure if we never open the word and listen to the voice of God we shut a major way in which the Holy

Spirit prompts us. Then as we listen to the news it may be that the Holy Spirit will prompt us to pray or to do something in response to the news. As we talk with friends we may hear of someone in need and the Holy Spirit may prompt us to do something to help. Sensitivity and then movement. Jesus urged his disciples to “watch and pray”. It seems that as we come to God in prayer and as we read his word we begin to see the world around us more with his eyes and so as we watch we are more sensitive whether it is just to seeing his hand in creation or to sensing the prompting of his Holy Spirit.

The image I have in mind is the yacht on the sea. It will have its sails up ready to react to the wind as it blows.

If we are to keep in step with the Holy Spirit we will need to be sensitive ready to move as he leads us.

Following the leader sensitive to the leading and

3. continuing on the right path.

When Paul wrote keep in step with the spirit it had a sense of the continuous, of keeping on going on the right path and that meant ignoring other ways.

I remember going to the National Gallery. I'd go into a room and start looking at one lot of paintings from say 17th Century and then see a doorway go through it and find that suddenly I'm looking at a different painter and now from the 19th Century. Then through another door and another because there might be something exciting in the next room. The result was I never really explored one painter or period. I'm the same when I'm out walking – I see a path that looks interesting and have got to go and follow it. What Paul was saying here goes back to the idea we mentioned earlier and that is of two ways to live. He wanted them to continue walking the way of God not being drawn off onto other paths that inevitably lead away from God. Keep in step with the Spirit continue on the right path. It may be hard, it may not seem as glamorous, but it is God's way. This is the way we should walk. Jesus spoke about the wide gate and the broad road that lead to destruction and the small gate and narrow road that leads to life.

At each step of each day we have a choice which path we are on and who we are following. If we keep in step with the Holy Spirit, focussed on Jesus, sensitive to the Spirit's promptings and continuing on the path we will live the life of God now, life as Jesus said in all its fullness and we will share in eternal life at the end.

So this Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the one who brings God's life into ours. But God wants us to live that life for this is the full the abundant life that God has planned for us. We can only find that fullness and abundance if we keep in step with the Spirit. Allowing him to prompt and guide us along the path of life as he points us to Jesus and helps us to follow him.