

Come, Holy Spirit!

John 14:15-21

Seventh Sunday in Easter/ 2nd June 2019

Yes, I know Pentecost is next Sunday, but I felt led this week to reflect a little early on the work of the Holy Spirit. And I want to begin with a vision. Joachim de Fiori was a Cistercian abbot, theologian, and mystic. Born around 1135, he died in Calabria, Italy, in 1202. Although never condemned as a heretic, his writings were. He was a controversial figure. He was a millenarian—that is, someone who believed that the one-thousand-year reign of Christ promised in Revelation (20:6) would be realized, literally, historically.¹ It was only a matter of time. One day he had a vision that attracted the attention of some and threatened others.

What did Joachim see? He saw history divided into three ages or epochs, one for each person of the Trinity. First was the *Age of the Father*: this was the Old Testament era, a time of judges and rules and obedience to the law of God. Then came the *Age of the Son*: this was the New Testament era and the generations that followed Christ, the period that witnessed the emergence and growth of the Church. He said that 1260 would witness the arrival of the new and final era, which he called the *Age of the Holy Spirit*. In this age people would have direct contact with God through the Holy Spirit. It would be an age known for universal love, the kind that flowed from the presence of Christ, a Christ transcendent to the letter of a text, beyond scripture. The institutional Church would be replaced by something new. In the Age of the Holy Spirit, “there would be no more need for the hierarchy of the Church, for [everyone] would be contemplatives” or mystics.² People would know the freedom of Christ first-hand, individually, not through the mediation of the Church. The meaning of the gospel would be experienced within community, but not mediated by an institution. In the Age of the Holy Spirit the Church would become unnecessary—or so he thought. One can see why the Church considered his ideas heretical.

We need to remember, though, that in every heresy there’s always an element of the truth. The novelist Graham Greene (1904-1991) once said, “Heresy is another word for freedom of thought.” Sometimes heresy is a partial truth mistaken for the whole truth. Sometimes the hidden truth in heresy needs to wait and be unveiled in another time—when it’s really needed or when we’re ready to receive its truth. What if the partial truth that needs to be given more space in our “orthodoxy” is Joachim’s vision for the work of the Holy Spirit? It has some resonance with what we find in the Fourth Gospel, in Jesus’ teachings on the Holy Spirit. In John 14, Jesus tells us that he will send someone to lead us into all truth. The Advocate—the *Paracletos*—is, literally, someone who will stand alongside us and walk with us.

The Advocate will be among us, around us, but the Spirit will also be at work *within* us. In John’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit extends and embodies the presence of the crucified-risen Christ. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit during his ministry, and then after his resurrection, on Easter, we’re told that Jesus “breathed” the Holy Spirit directly into his disciples (John 20:22). In the book of Acts, in contrast, the Spirit arrives after Jesus’ ascension, to the disciples in a house, and then they begin to speak in different tongues to the wider community (2:1-13). In John, the Spirit’s work has a communal dimension, but its far more personal, although never

individualistic. The Spirit rests *around* and *in* the disciple of Christ, the individual disciple who worships and serves in community. Yes, the Spirit is evident in the community, but Jesus also wants us to trust that he will come and live *within* us, within our spirits, deep in the core of our psyches. The Spirit breathes through us. And the Spirit walks with us and then leads us in the way we should go, leads into the truth—not dogmatic truth, not theological propositions or beliefs, but the unfolding knowledge that we discover in and through our relationship with Christ, through the Spirit.³ The Spirit leads us into truth, in and through love. In and through the Spirit’s love we are led into truth.

In the long history of Christianity those who have known all of this best, based on their personal experiences, are the mystics. Unfortunately, the Church has often viewed the mystics with suspicion, especially Protestants. I feel, however, that contemporary Christianity has a lot to gain from the rich and deep vision of the mystics, both the orthodox and the so-called heretical. Because what they point to, what they offer us is this extraordinary claim: *it is possible to experience the Holy, both among us and most certainly within us*. They want us to know that the Holy Spirit is available to us; the Spirit of Christ has come and is coming alongside us to lead our lives into the very life of God! Isn’t this what Jesus promised?

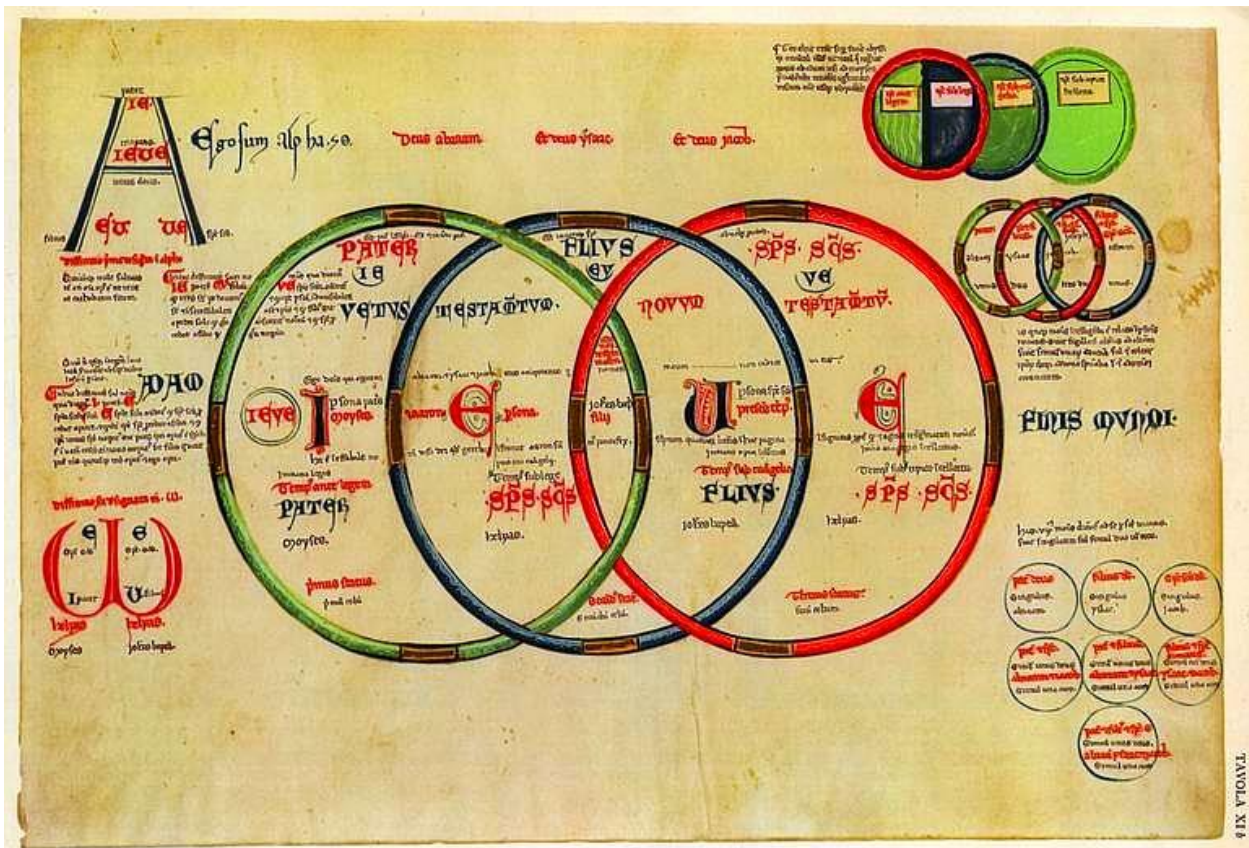
The English mystic Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) had a word to describe this experience of being drawn into a closeness with God through the Spirit. She called it *oneing*. In 1373, at the age of 30, seriously ill and close to death, she was given a series of “showings” or revelations, which ended when she was fully healed. These were later written down in what might be the earliest surviving book in the English language written by a woman, [*Revelations of Divine Love*](#).

She experienced the power and presence and reality of God’s love. It was love calling her, leading her, deeper and deeper into a profound intimacy with God. “It is by our longing that we will be liberated,” she said. It is our longing, our desire for God—to be close to the Holy—that leads us to the One we’ve been looking for *and* who, at the same time, is looking for us. “Through our yearning,” she discovered, “our yearning for oneing we shall come to be one.” One with God; one with Jesus. One. Participating in the life of God. That’s what the Spirit does. It’s what the Spirit yearns for us: *that we experience intimacy with God*. It’s the goal of life. It makes sense, then, why she could affirm, “And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well.”

It's clear that many people today aren't looking for religious institutions and church hierarchies to mediate the presence of God. People don't want the faith *of* the Church. Instead, they hunger for an experience of the Holy. People are yearning for the voice of the Spirit, for the love and truth that Christ reveals. Sociologists say that we are witnessing one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of Christianity.⁴ Something is dying. We can see it in declining worship attendance in Europe and the United States over the last fifty years. You might have heard the [NPR story](#) this week about the challenges facing rural churches in America, church attendance is dropping and there are fewer people in the pews.

But it’s also clear that something new is emerging. But what if Joachim was right? He was just off by one thousand years. What if we are slowly emerging into a new age of the Spirit? What if this is a season to reclaim the true purpose of the Church, to reencounter the *Lord* of the Church, and reconnect with the power and presence of the Spirit, our Advocate — sent to help us to love? I hope so. Because it’s going to take the power and presence, the love and truth and grace of the Spirit—in community, and also *in us*—to save Christianity and the Church.

Perhaps, then, the ancient prayer, “Come, Holy Spirit,” will become our prayer today. *Come, Holy Spirit. Come!*



The Three Ages in Joachim de Fiore’s Liber Figurarum.

¹ On Joachim’s theological view of history, see Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 145ff.

² Helen M. Luke, *Kaleidoscope: The Way of Woman and Other Essays* (Morning Light Press, 2004), 176.

³ Gary D. Badcock, *Light of Truth and Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 33-34.

⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker Books, 2012).