

Sermon at St John the Evangelist, Cambridge 19th July 2026

3 Sundays, in midst of summer - of which today is 2nd - with a common focus on one of the most profound texts in all Christian literature: Romans 8. +Three Sundays, also, with parables of Jesus about seed planting + words from OT about the awesomeness of God... A veritable feast at the heart of summer, in which to step back & breathe more deeply; putting down deep roots + drawing from the depths of God's Spirit.

Such is importance of Paul's Letter to Romans that it has been described as 5th Gospel + in this context, Romans 8 stands at a pivotal point in whole Letter, addressing, in particular, a key question: what does it mean to live life 'by the Spirit'?

It was warm and captivating, and the atmosphere was remarkable, as I sat in a tent – in the middle of a field in France, in summer, on a day just like today. I was at Taizé, on a youth pilgrimage from the Diocese of Leicester, sitting in one of the great worship tents: listening to one of the Brothers talk in depth about Romans 8. +It suddenly hit me (as we worked through the Letter in a sustained way – and afterwards discussed it together, in small groups) that here was a message, if true, that was profoundly life-changing, with radical implications not only for our faith, but for daily life back home. So let's hear again those words of St Paul, in Romans 8, which landed – in my lap – like an unexploded mine, as I sat in that field in France, some 15 years ago:

'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery...but you have received a spirit of adoption—when we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God—if children then heirs, heirs of God & joint heirs with Christ.'

So what does this mean? I want you to think, for a moment, of a time when you felt completely, entirely, utterly accepted and loved; when you knew that you truly belonged; when you dared to believe that what you needed most (as far as was practically possible) would be met? When you felt no fear or loneliness, but only love and communion – a sense of wellbeing & right relationship with those around you, and indeed with the natural world.

Well I think it's perhaps only when we begin to think in those terms – whether that's been part of our recent experience or not – that **we begin to glimpse the kind of transformed relationship** with God of which St Paul speaks. 'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.'

In other words, for those who belong to God through Faith (& renewed daily by prayer and open-hearted trust), **the Spirit of God really does dwell in our hearts** – moment by moment. And if we stop to think about it, and dare to believe it, the implications are utterly life-changing: for, yes, living in the Spirit really does mean that God dwells within us, that we are children of God – adopted into his family – and thus able to talk to God with the most profound intimacy: Abba! Father! +Above all, we discover that we are completely, entirely +utterly accepted & loved.

'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.' Yes, you & I & all those who dare to respond to God, are led by Him and filled by his Spirit, we are all his children, heirs to all that God promises and longs to give us.

In other words, it's only as it gradually dawns on us, in the risky business of faith, that **God really does love us, and his Spirit dwells within us**, that we begin to entrust everything to Him, daring to dream of that new world (God's Kingdom) that he longs to bring about. And discovering, as we dare to dream and to walk in this light, that it really works.

So 'Living in the Spirit' is about so much more than simply coming to Church or knowing the right things, it's about daring to live out of a deep inner relationship with God, who loves us. Living in the Spirit is about a whole new relationship with God, who dwells within us and empowers us to experience God and talk to God, in a radically different way. A life-giving way (a new way of being human) which, if we dare to believe, changes everything.

The problem is, of course, that we live in a time poor society and a world of broken relationships, in which it can be so difficult to believe that God really does love us, and adopts us into his family. We live at a time where individuals & communities are under acute strain and many in our world are left behind by so-called progress. So many are lonely+ feel that they don't belong; that they're not truly loved; or their needs are shunned by the world around them.

For **we all need to know and to discover that we are truly loved**: by God, and by other people. And this is why it's so vital for us – as a local Christian community – to continue to build and model a radically loving, accepting and welcoming space to belong, in order to enable each other to discover that God really does love us too. And perhaps this is why the Christian Church first came into being, not just to proclaim the Gospel, but to model the kind of loving community that was necessary for us to dare to discover that, yes, contrary to all the evidence, God really does love us; his Spirit dwells within us; we are part of his extended family. *'All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God and fellow heirs with Christ.'*

You & I, who are led by the Spirit of God, are his children, we belong to him and to one another, we are part of Christ, we are his children, heirs of his Spirit of love and joy and peace; invited to pray, to live out of a deeply intimate relationship with him, to talk to him and bring our needs to him; and entrusted with the joyful commission of building his church, his kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven, and bearing the good fruits of his Spirit. *Amen*

*Revd Canon James Shakespeare
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