A friend of mine served as curate at a parish in Birmingham. One of the things Nigel really enjoyed were his regular visits to a ladies meeting at a local Pentecostal church where he would play the piano for them. It was with great delight that he told me about one of their favourite songs. It was about receiving showers of blessing from the Holy Spirit and had a chorus which included the line ‘Let some droppings fall on me’...

Which brings us to the role of the dove in the passage we have just heard from Matthew chapter 3. We need to make sure that, rather than going off in misleading flights of imaginative fancy, we earth the way we think about this in what the Bible tells us.

The coming of the Holy Spirit onto Jesus is described as ‘like a dove’ in all four gospels and it’s an image which is widely used to depict the Holy Spirit in art and culture. Though it is rather curious, isn’t it? One eminent commentator describes it as ‘fascinating and perplexing’!

Why a dove? In our day, of course, we associate doves with gentleness and peace. And it’s certainly true that peace and gentleness are part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. But that doesn’t seem to be the main emphasis here in Matthew 3.

So where else in the Bible do we find the picture of the dove?

It’s not made explicit in the Bible itself, but early Jewish commentators tackling the beginning of Genesis 1 suggest that the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters ‘like a dove’. Would the people watching what was happening to Jesus have made this link? Certainly, as we look back on the scene today, we can see that the Spirit who hovered with pregnant power over the waters of chaos to bring about creation is the same Spirit who hovered over the waters of baptism to bring about the new creation at the dawn of the ministry of Jesus.

Another strand comes in the Old Testament’s Song of Songs, where we read this: ‘O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.’

It may, of course, be a complete coincidence - but this picture of the intimacy of close relationship is reflected in what Jesus hears from his Father here in verse 17: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ The coming of the Spirit like a dove is closely linked to the fresh assurance Jesus receives of his relationship with his heavenly Father. The Holy Spirit confirms and assures and strengthens him in his identity as the Son of God as he embarks on his years of ministry.

This is a connection which fits in with one of the Bible’s rather more surprising references to doves. One of Felix Mendelssohn’s most famous arias comes from the oratorio ‘Elijah’. Remember this? ‘O for the wings, for the wings, of a dove...’ Now why would anyone want the wings of a dove? Well, let’s look at the context in Psalm 55.6-8:
‘Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, ‘O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; truly, I would flee far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and tempest.’

The Psalmist could have chosen any bird, couldn’t he - apart perhaps from an ostrich! But in the imagery of this psalm he chooses the wings of a dove to enable him to make good his escape. For him, the dove is a symbol of power and energy. Perhaps we recall Noah’s choice of the dove as the bird he sent out to search for evidence of the waters going down again after the Great Flood in Genesis 8. For a task like that, you don’t want something that will soon get tired! You need a bird with powerful long-life batteries! The dove is a symbol, not so much of peace and tranquility, but of strength and endurance.

When the Bible was originally written, it wasn’t divided into chapters and verses. These came much later. And, useful though they are to help us find our way around, chapter divisions can sometimes be rather artificial and misleading. That’s certainly true at the end of Matthew chapter 3. For in fact, the story doesn’t come to a stop at the end of chapter 3 verse 17. The action flows straight on... ‘And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.’

Though somewhat disconcerting, this is surely no coincidence. Immediately after this wonderful experience of strengthening and reassurance, the very same Spirit pitchforks Jesus into a bruising encounter with the devil. The connections are further underlined by the subject of the temptation he faces: ‘If you are the Son of God...’, repeated three times. Surely we can reverently suggest that part of Jesus’ ability to resist and defeat such temptation was that, because of what he had just experienced, he had no need to prove to himself or to anyone else that he was indeed the Son of God? How was he so sure? Because the Holy Spirit was resting upon him and providing all the assurance he needed. Because the Holy Spirit was strengthening him to be someone of whom the Father could say and go on saying, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Well it’s good to reflect on the experience of Jesus. But we need to know that the Bible doesn’t leave it there. The message of the New Testament is that we too are intended to know what it is to be sons and daughters of the living God. We too are intended to enjoy this blessing of the Holy Spirit. We too can be strengthened to resist evil. We too can be equipped to fulfil whatever ministry God has for us. Jesus has blazed a trail which he invites us to follow.

We could quibble and have long discussions about whether Jesus really needed the Holy Spirit in this way or whether his sinless perfection as the Son of God would have seen him through. But that’s not quite the point. For whether or not he really needed the Holy Spirit like this, we certainly do!

Just as with Jesus himself, this deep assurance of a living relationship with our heavenly Father is the foundation of all that God intends us to be and to do. This is where it begins. As the apostle John puts it, ‘We love because he first loved us’ (1 John 4.19). So let us open our hearts and lives to every declaration and every demonstration of the love of God for us, not least as, once again, we open our hands to receive the bread and wine of holy communion. May God’s Holy Spirit be at work so that we are indeed those with whom the Father is well pleased. Amen.