

Did You Receive The Holy Spirit?
Baptism of the Lord, Year C
Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22
10 January 2010

Sometimes crucial events in our lives happen in such a low-key way that we don't realise their significance until it is all over. Luke writes up the baptism of Jesus that way. There has been a mass baptism in the Jordan by John, and almost as an after thought we are told that Jesus was among their number. Then afterwards, away from the madding crowd, while Jesus is at prayer, the real action takes place. The Holy Spirit comes upon him in a visible, beautiful way, and as the Father speaks from heaven, we become aware that we are witnessing a disclosure of the inner life of God. The three Divine persons are in dialogue with each other, in a conversation that is full of approval, and of blessing, and of authorisation. Above all, it is being made clear to us, that Jesus, as he begins his ministry, is brim full of the Holy Spirit.

Already in Luke we have been hearing quite a bit about the Holy Spirit, and we are only up to chapter 3. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, so was her husband Zechariah, and we are told that their son John grew strong in spirit. And of course Mary and Simeon are well acquainted with its ways. So it is clear that you have to have the Holy Spirit if you are about God's business.

Later on, when all these principal actors in the gospel drama have done their thing, the question of the Spirit's presence in the lives of believers becomes a major issue. In the 19th chapter of Acts Paul arrives at Ephesus, encounters some recent converts, and asks them, "Did you receive the Holy

Spirit when you became believers?” “No,” they replied, “we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” It turns out that these folk have received John’s baptism of repentance. So Paul fills them in on more recent developments, baptises them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and as he lays hands on them they begin to speak in tongues and to prophesy. This is a mini Pentecost as Luke makes clear to us again that you have got to have the Holy Spirit to be a Christian, and that if you have the Holy Spirit there ought to be some dramatic results in your life.

The Holy Spirit is a growing, developing presence throughout the pages of Scripture. At first it is in the nature of a happening, such as when Saul starts ecstatically raving with the band of prophets, as a sign that the Spirit wants him to be the first King over Israel. Then it becomes an agent of artistic inspiration, as it equips musicians and craftsmen to make the Temple a place of beautiful worship. Next it falls powerfully upon the prophets, giving them courage and insight to oppose the march to destruction of God’s people. Following this, the Spirit’s presence becomes focussed on and in the person of Jesus in a particularly intense form. It narrows down to this person, and discloses itself in remarkable ways as master over the forces of nature, as the restorer of people’s diseased and decaying bodies, as the caster out of demons and evil powers, and as the discerners of what people are thinking and feeling.

What happens next is that Jesus transmits this Spirit in such a way as to make it universally available to all those who are prepared to receive it. The gospel writers differ as to exactly when this happened. For John it happened on the cross as

Jesus yielded up his Spirit. For Luke it happened on the day of Pentecost in the upper room. What is really significant here is that the Spirit of Jesus is now abroad in the world looking for people it can take up residence in.

That is where we come in. I should imagine that just about everyone here this morning has been baptised. That is a very helpful first step. As the New Testament makes clear, you have to be baptised to be a Christian. But that is just the start, and baptism won't do us much good if we don't co-operate fully to make its effects real in our lives. After all Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin were baptised, and they seem to have been successful in completely neutralising its good effects in their lives. They are an illustration of the fact that you can stifle the action of the Holy Spirit in your life.

But presumably we wouldn't be here this morning if we hadn't said yes to the Holy Spirit at some level, and if we hadn't felt prompted by him to respond by coming to worship. That is the next helpful step. God wants to unite himself to us, and he motivates us to want to unite ourselves to him - at its simplest that is what Christianity is all about. And worship is the activity where in that union is most likely to happen in its most direct and intense form.

But to get back to that curiosity filled question of Paul to the Ephesian converts, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit?" What are the other signs that the Holy Spirit is taking ground in our lives, and is being permitted by us to get closer to the heart of who we are?

Well, it is called the Holy Spirit, and the holiness bit is worth thinking about. It is not just a spirit of intoxicating energy and power. It is in the business

of moral regeneration, which means it is interested in purifying our motives, in sharpening up our ethical antennae, and in improving our ethical behaviour. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, tolerance, and self-control. That is a useful checklist to see how we are doing in letting the holiness of the Holy Spirit get to work on us.

When I was tracing the history of the Holy Spirit I pointed to its close association with the ministry of the prophets. Do we have something of that prophetic spirit in us? Are we prepared to swim against the tide of the increasingly pagan assumptions of our culture? Do we feel hot indignation when we see the ways and the name of God belittled, and do we have a ready and a persuasive word to address to those situations? Are we acquiring a sharp eyed insight into the signs of the times, a God's eye view of what is going on underneath the surface of things in our city and in our society? Are we courageous in standing up for the things of God – can we accept the challenge of the old Sunday school hymn, “Dare to be a Daniel, do what Daniels do?”

I was saying before that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. The most important thing that he does for us is to make Jesus available to us. What Jesus of Nazareth was to his contemporaries he can be for us now as the Christ of faith who is invisibly present to us through the action of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit isn't off on an independent agenda of its own making. It works to the same mission priorities as the Son, and its main interest is helping us to grow to become like him. We don't have to go to the Holy Land to retrace the steps of the historical Jesus –

the Holy Spirit makes the gospel story come alive in Avonside in our locale with our set of characters.

So another sign of the Spirit's growing reality in our lives is a sense of being gripped by the story of Jesus. We become deeply interested in what his life and death was all about. That life made available to us in the pages of the New Testament becomes the measure of what we think our life should be like. Or as Paul memorably put it, "The mystery is this – Christ in you, the hope of a glory to come." We become a microcosm of him through the action of the Holy Spirit.

But this doesn't happen through a kind of painting by numbers copying of what Jesus would do in this situation. The tell tale sign of the Spirit's presence in any situation is the sense of spontaneity and surprise that he injects into the flow of events through our world. The Holy Spirit is the master of the unexpected, the scriptwriter who can always come up with a novel ending to any story. If the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is the Spirit who is alive in us, then there will little sense of the stale or the dreary or the pedestrian in the way we play at being Christ. The Spirit will enable us to bring a sense of freshness and originality to the role that we were always meant to play, as we become the identity that is us in a more complete sense than anything we have ever known.