

Act of Worship at Home 9th January 2022

Reading Luke 3 vv 15-16, 21-22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, 'I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

Reflection

John answered the people saying "I baptise you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come,... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

I grew up in a church full of expat Scots; level-headed people not prone to emotionalism. I went to one of the more liberal ministerial training establishments. So what do I make of our reading today? I truly believe that there is a dimension to our faith that goes beyond what we believe and beyond what we do. That dimension is the dimension of God's presence that we call the Holy Spirit - and our acts, and our rituals, and our beliefs and all our good deeds and all our works of love, remain strangely empty until that dimension is encountered, until that dimension lights a fire within us with its own peculiar flame.

After an encounter with God's Spirit I have seen people who were bowed down by worry standing upright with hope written all over their face. I have seen men and women who believed in God, suddenly know God is present with them in a dynamic and living manner. Present with them, and present in them. I have seen lives changed.

Reading from Acts 8 vv 14-17 "Now when the disciples at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit - for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."

When Peter and John laid their hands on the disciples in Samaria and prayed for them – they did so because they saw the believers in Samaria hadn't yet encountered the transforming and energizing power of God's Spirit. And when Peter and John touched the believers of Samaria and prayed for them – something happened. Something that was visible.

Two thousand years later we don't know exactly what happened in Samaria – but we can guess a bit about what happened from what continues to happen today. Tears flow, laughter is heard, wounds are healed, fears dismissed, and joy and peace is written upon hearts and faces. And faith becomes deeper – mission becomes stronger.

In short – with an encounter with God's Spirit faith moves from simply here - in the head – to also being here - in the heart – and it changes everything. There is more to our faith than those things that we do and say, - more than trying to live moral and upright lives, - more than the sacraments of Baptism and Communion and worshipping on a regular basis. There is a mystery in our faith: a component to it that is beyond us and our ability to grasp it, or earn it, or work for it. And that is a good thing, a wonderful thing – a thing we should thank God for!

John the Baptist speaks of this mystery in today's Gospel reading when he says to the people who come out to him in the wilderness beyond the Jordan: John answered the people saying "I baptise you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come,... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

And Peter and John refer to the same thing – to that something more – to that thing which is greater than us and what we do when, as we heard in the reading from the Book of Acts, they go down to Samaria to visit the believers who live there and laid hands on them: "they prayed for the believers

that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit had not yet come down on any of them – they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

There is a power that is greater than human power, a spirit, that is greater than the human spirit, - and it comes to us - it can touch us and change us - it can fill us and use us - it can lift us up and inspire us - it can give us strength and heal and comfort us. That power is greater than we can conceive more real than we can imagine more loving and caring than we can - or do - expect.

By that power God brings us to people at the very time they need an expression of God's presence to come to them, at the very time they need a sign of hope, a prayer, something more than they have to keep them going another day. And we each do that – when we open ourselves to God's presence, to the leading of God's Spirit.

It is about ordinary things – human things – being touched by the divine – being given new hope – new joy – new life. Amen.

Time of Prayer

We offer you our praise, gracious Lord, for wherever we may go, we are in your care. No place or time is beyond your reach, whatever we may encounter, you are greater, nothing can take us out of your hand, no power can compare with yours.

We thank you that even in the midst of difficulty you give us hope.

When the problems of life threaten to overwhelm us you are there to guide, encourage and sustain us.

We praise you for the love you show us, undeserved by us, yet offered freely and faithfully.

In your grace, you gave Jesus that we might know your healing, your peace, your love.

In Jesus, you are gathering us together to be your people, a light to the world that reflects your glory and love.

Gracious God, present with us now, present with us always, receive our praise through Jesus our Saviour. Amen.

Hymn

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart
Be all else but naught to me, save that thou art
Be thou my best thought in the day and the night
O waking and sleeping, thy presence my light

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word
Be thou ever with me, and thy with me Lord
Be thou my great Father, and I thy true son
Be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight
Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might
Be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun
O grant me it's joys, after victory is won
Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall
Still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.



Blessing

Let us go from here to love and service the Lord.

And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen.