

Baptism of Our Lord

13 January 2019

Readings for Baptism of the Lord (Year C)

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

What I find really interesting in today's reading from Acts is that Luke mentions that the Holy Spirit had not come upon any of the Samaritans and then states that they had 'only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus'. It is only after Peter and John lay hands upon them that they receive the Holy Spirit.

What is going on here?

Doesn't the gift of the Holy Spirit occur at baptism?

How come the Samaritans missed out?

. . . Does it really matter?

Let's look at these questions in turn.

Doesn't the gift of the Holy Spirit occur at baptism? The answer is yes, normally. The usual teaching is that 'At baptism, the child receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. From earliest times the gift of the Holy Spirit has been associated with baptism (Acts 8.14-17).'¹

Our Gospel for today shows Jesus being baptised and the Holy Spirit descending on him as he prays. It is the Spirit who will lead him into the desert after this, the Spirit who will sustain him in his forty days in the wilderness. There is clearly a manifestation of the Spirit in Jesus' baptism, yet I would question strongly that this is the first. Who was it who led Jesus to engage in discussion with the leaders in the temple when he was twelve? Who was it who led Jesus to seek baptism at the hands of John the Baptist? Jesus was empowered for and guided in his ministry by the work of the Holy Spirit.

When we look at other accounts of baptism in Acts, it is often the case that receiving the Spirit occurs just after, or simultaneously with, water baptism. Yet this is by no means the only pattern. The biblical scholar, Ben Witherington, in his commentary on Acts, notes,

. . . . the Spirit comes sometimes with apostles present, sometimes without (cf. 9.17); sometimes with the laying on of hands, sometimes without (cf. 2.38); sometimes very close to the time of water baptism, sometimes not; sometimes before water baptism, sometimes after (as here)².

¹ p. 80. Peter Jackson and Christ Wright: *Faith Confirmed*.

² p. 288. Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*.

You may be wondering, why the specific reference to water baptism? This is to distinguish it from the one mentioned in our Gospel today, where John the Baptist refers to a baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that is, Pentecost.

What do we learn from this? *That the workings of the Spirit cannot be predicted or confined.* As Jesus reminds Nicodemus about the working of the Spirit, 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you do not know where it comes from or where it goes' (Jn 3.8). The workings of the Holy Spirit are by no means limited to baptism or to our expectations.

We also learn that the Spirit is inclusive; the Samaritans were age old enemies of the Jews because of a centuries old dispute about holy places. Each considered the other as second-class citizens. Perhaps the Samaritans thought they would not be welcome among Jewish Christians. Yet the leaders of the Christian Church came from Jerusalem, laid hands upon them, and in so doing asserted their status as full members of the Church. Through the gift of the Spirit, former hostilities were turned into unity in Christ. Outsiders became insiders.

We simply don't know *why the delay for the Samaritans* between water baptism and the gift of the Spirit; Luke does not tell us.

My third question was, *does it really matter?* No prizes for guessing the answer! I don't want to keep you inside any longer than I have to on this glorious summer day so I will forgo a comprehensive sermon on the theology of the Holy Spirit and give you the dot point version:

- the Holy Spirit is the agent of renewal within the Church
- the Holy Spirit is God with us now, the one whom Jesus promised to send to sustain us
- it is the Holy Spirit who distributes gifts – the traditional seven gifts of the Holy Spirit³, and different kinds of special gifts⁴ for each believer
- the Holy Spirit gives life; it was she who breathed over the waters of creation, she who founded the Church on the Day of Pentecost
- the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of believers, helping people to pray and to become more like Christ
- the Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in the sacraments. Shortly Fr Paul will extend his hands over the gifts of bread and wine, and pray that through the power of the Spirit, they will

3 Wisdom, understanding, counsel, inward strength, knowledge, true Godliness and fear of the Lord (based on Isaiah 11.1-3)

4 Eg service, healing, preaching, teaching, discernment, speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 12.4-11)

become the body and blood of Christ. At baptism we are born again to new life in Christ through the power of the Spirit.

Just think what the Samaritans would have missed out on, had they not been given this gift!

We too have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and I would suggest that now, as we re-affirm our baptismal promises shortly, is a very appropriate time to reconsider what this gift might mean to us.

We here at Christ Church stand at a liminal point in time, a threshold. Like Janus, the two-headed god of the Roman new year, we face behind and ahead. We remember with gratitude the life-giving ministry of Fr Richard, now Bishop of Gippsland, and we leave this in the past, building on those strengths. We eagerly anticipate the ministry of Fr Craig, our new vicar, to be inducted in eighteen days' time. New vicar, new vision. A new vicar will inevitably mean new challenges and changes from familiar ways.

Our baptismal calling is to die to sin and to rise to new life in Christ. In baptism, we committed ourselves to striving to live as a disciple of Christ, to loving God with our whole hearts and our neighbours as ourselves, until our lives' end.

The Holy Spirit **is** alive and well and renews us and the Church through the gifts we have been given, both individually and as a parish community; many of these gifts were summarised in the parish survey late last year. Who knows what the Holy Spirit will do with us through them?

Let us be ready to use these gifts, to face challenge and change and to live out our baptismal calling in the power of the Holy Spirit as we move into this new era.

Jill Renison
Christ Church South Yarra