

Jesus' Baptism: Power, Prayer The Spirit

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
First Sunday after the Epiphany—10 January 2016
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Luke 3.12-22

Introduction

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." In other words, the gospel makes sense in itself and it makes sense of everything else. It is light.

That is the meaning of Epiphany, the manifestation of the light that has come into the world and gives meaning to it.

That is what the subject of The First Sunday of Epiphany always celebrates, the baptism of Jesus. In the first three Gospels the baptism is regarded as the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, his showing (epiphany) to the world. Jesus has come to show to the world what the kingdom (rule) of God is like and who may enter it.

The Gospel reading today is in three parts; John's witness to Jesus, Herod's witness to Jesus, and God's witness to Jesus.

John's witness to Jesus 15-17

During Advent we looked at John's preaching and role and the powerful effect he had among all sorts of people. The people thought John may well be the hoped for Messiah such was the effect of his powerful preaching but he repudiates such a notion as we know.

John clearly states that he does not have the status of the Coming One; for instance, he is not even worthy to be the lowliest slave of such a one even to the point of untying his sandal strap. He is but a messenger, a pointer to something far greater. But most important to John the Coming One is so much more powerful, bearing with him all the power of God; John baptizes with water but the greater one would baptize with God's power, the power of the age to come, the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Holy Spirit is one of the prominent themes of this Gospel, its undergirding force, its focus. The new age is about to dawn, the long promised Spirit is about flow not as a gentle stream but as a purifying fire to cleanse and restore God's people for their task of being God's people in the world.

John's task is to 'winnow' i.e. to call people to take up God's agenda of justice and forsake their own agenda, to declare themselves for or against God's agenda. A decision for or against the baptism of repentance is a public declaration of where one stands in relation God's agenda. This is preparatory work, anticipating the Messiah's coming, his epiphany.

The Coming One's task is to clear the threshing floor, to clean it up, to gather up those ready for God's work of justice and peace and have publicly committed to it, and then to take up the implementation of the rule of God among all peoples.

And that is all highly political. At the Jordan, a repentant, baptized people set free and ready to become God's agents of covenant mercy: A new Exodus at the Jordan, a new ruler to lead them into a new nationhood.

Then we read Herod's witness to Jesus 18-20

I know that this is a very strange idea that Herod witnesses to Jesus. And Luke is not greatly interested in the details of Herod's erratic sexual life and political tyranny. John has spoken against all evil to all classes of society so he was not likely to ignore the ruling elites. He was prophet after all, so it was expected.

So Herod had noticed John. And John had noticed Herod. This was not Herod the Great of course, long dead some thirty plus years but a later relative called Herod Antipas who had first married the daughter of Aretas of Arabia and then divorced her and married his niece, Herodias, who was already married to Herod Philip his brother.

The other gospel writers fill in the details of John's imprisonment and grisly death at the behest of Herodias and her daughter. Luke generalizes Herod's behavior as 'all the evil things Herod had done.' Herod Antipas continued the family tradition of rapacity and violence. So he shut John up in prison for daring to speak against the power politics of the wealthy and the powerful and not just their sexual proclivities.

In other Gospels this happens much later but Luke places it here as a salutary reminder, a reminder reminiscent of the birth stories that the kingdom, the rule of God's justice will be contested every step of the way.

And that is Herod's witness to Jesus. The wealthy and the powerful, the rapacious and violent will contest this Coming One this epiphany all the way to the cross. Herod represents those who will not accept the baptism of repentance, he will not pick up God's agenda. He will live in opposition to God so he will oppose the messenger, first John then Jesus.

The third part of the reading is God's witness to Jesus 21-22

Jesus' baptism by John at the beginning of the ministry is well known and each evangelist tells the story his own way. The baptism itself is not recorded only the subsequent events and there is great emphasis on prayer and the spirit coming in a bodily form like a dove.

Jesus was praying. Only Luke notes that but it is highly significant for his story. Jesus at prayer is one of the great themes of this Gospel. Jesus not only prays but he also teaches disciples about praying. Luke is the only Gospel writer to do so. We do not pay enough attention to it. Prayer is the point of revelation or epiphany. John and his baptism will fade but prayer remains the critical place at which God reveals. It is the place of friendship, it is the place of speech and most of all it is the place of listening and hearing. Jesus' prayer is not formal but personal, relational, revelational.

It is in such prayer that the Holy Spirit descends and a great mystery is now made clear. God's son is revealed a royal son the great king who would rule in justice and peace. He is anointed not with oil but the Holy Spirit. He is the promised king of Psalm 2.7,

'He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you."' And I remind you of the words of Gabriel to Mary (1.32-33),

'He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

But the mystery has yet more to offer for God is well pleased reflecting Isaiah 42.1.

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

He is the servant who is divinely anointed by the Spirit for God's mission for justice and peace.

Now we know who Jesus is and what is his power and authority for his mission; the Holy Spirit. This is his epiphany. By his uncompromising obedience to his call from God he will establish justice and peace for the whole world in the power of the Spirit.

But what we will find in this Gospel and in the Acts as we have read today the Spirit empowers the church, the people of God, the disciples in their roles as bearers of the message of the kingdom. That is why Luke writes both parts of his work. The same Spirit that empowers Jesus now empowers his people.

The Holy Spirit is the promise of the Age to Come. But the Spirit is here. The Age to Come is here. God's future is now in our present. The Spirit makes the future real now.

In the Spirit heaven and earth are joined together. We become the place where heaven and earth meet both personally and corporately. Those whom God's spirit anoints are God's dwelling place, God's temple. That is why the sacraments are not just mere pictures. God's presence is embedded in and among us in the Spirit.

There will be much more to say about the Spirit. That is the purpose of the gospel. But we will need to remember this event as we take our journey in this Gospel. The spirit has been let loose in prayer and anything might happen.

Conclusion

NT Wright has said, "God doesn't give people the Holy Spirit in order to let them enjoy the spiritual equivalent of a day at Disneyland." And when we read a passage like this we understand why that is so. The Holy Spirit empowers us to carry out God's agenda in our world.

That provokes opposition, in some cases for some people a deadly opposition.

Here some questions we will need to answer as we go through this Gospel.

Do we want this Holy Spirit?

Will we make prayer a central part of our lives?

Will we work together under the guidance of this Spirit to find out God's agenda for us and then obey the Spirit?