

**Baptism of Christ, Year B, 2009**  
**Genesis 1:1-5; Ps 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**  
***Baptised with the Holy Spirit***

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The spirit of God sweeps across today's readings like a gust of wind; not a gentle breeze, but driving and powerful, with creative force. When the earth was a formless void, we read in Genesis, a wind from God swept over the face of the waters: "a mighty wind, a violent, invading wind or Spirit of God", the original language implies. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul asks disciples of John the Baptist: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" "No", they said, "what is it?" So Paul "baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus, laid his hands on them, and the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied". And in our Gospel reading, we hear John the Baptist proclaim that "he – Jesus- will baptize you with the Holy Spirit". And when Jesus was himself baptized by John, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

Receiving the Holy Spirit; being baptized with the Holy Spirit: In our baptism services we ask that the Holy Spirit be poured out in blessing, and we talk of the new life that God gives us through the Holy Spirit. Scripture and tradition affirm that we receive the Holy Spirit at our baptisms. "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" means we are baptised into all who God is; and the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us.

What are we to make of this receiving of the Holy Spirit, this holy and forcefully powerful and invasive wind of God, person of the Godhead? What does it mean for us to be "baptized with the Holy Spirit", as John the Baptist declares we are to be? If there was ever a part of Scripture that attracted extremes of diverse opinion within the Christian church at large, the receiving of the Holy Spirit would have to jostle there for first place.

The primary tension is not with who or what the Holy Spirit is, although there are of course some arguments there. Christian Churches are united in their affirmation of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity of God, even though there are some who relegate the Spirit to being an impersonal life force or energy or "stream of love." However, the polarity, the opposing ends of the spectrum of beliefs has, on the one end, the Holy Spirit as the sleeping partner of the Trinity, quietly tucked away, domesticated and polite; at best a gentle Godly prompting within us, guiding our consciences, helping us in our faith. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the Pentecostal Movement's understanding of baptism with or in or by the Spirit – loud, visible, mighty, hugely experiential; like those disciples at Ephesus, accompanied by speaking in tongues and other miraculous gifts of the Spirit. And accompanied by a fervor and excitement about the Lord Jesus.

Many of us grew up in the church in the days when God's Spirit was known as the Holy Ghost –pretty frightening for most children. You'd want to keep a bit of a healthy distance from a Ghost, never mind if it was holy. English writer and devout Anglican, Dorothy Sayers famously caricatures the catechism:

***"Question: What does the Church think of the Holy Ghost?"***

**Answer:** *I don't know exactly. He was never heard of until Whit Sunday. There is a sin against him, which damns you forever, but no-one knows what it is.*

**Question:** *What is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity?*

**Answer:** *The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible – the whole thing incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult. Nothing to do with daily life or reality”.*

“Nothing to do with daily life or reality”: and here we have that far end of the spectrum. Whilst at this end of the spectrum, God's Spirit might be quietly acknowledged, as I said earlier, the whole idea of “being baptized with the Holy Spirit” –if we've ever even thought about those words – can be something to be resisted if it possibly means turning fundamentalist and waving one's hands in the air, or speaking in tongues, God forbid. Or the words “receive the Holy Spirit” might just slip by us, perhaps with us being like those disciples of John the Baptist whom Paul met at Ephesus –“We haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit”, or the equivalent “So what?”

The typical prayer book Anglican, or plain conservative main line church member might want to say “we don't do things like that in our church. We like to keep things orderly and nice, under control”. We're very good at taking the middle road, the via media, and being doctrinally tidy and altogether Respectable in the Anglican Church. My own dear mother –not an Anglican, of Presbyterian heritage, but middle class, respectable and conservative about things religious, was quite horrified at me being serious about my faith: “You don't want to get too carried away”, she'd say, “a little bit of religion is acceptable, but not too much”. (She worried about what the neighbours would think –goodness knows what she might have said if I was a Pentecostal)

Yet here we are, confronted by John the Baptist telling us in all four Gospels, that the one to come – Jesus- will baptize us with the Holy Spirit. And the Church also affirming this.

So, let's get into this. The other end of the spectrum –the Pentecostal end - asserts that there are two stages of initiation or entry into the Christian life –the first is conversion, after which one should be baptized in water; the second is a new and different quality of experience distinct from conversion, often called baptism in the Holy Spirit, but also variously identified as “entire sanctification” (as in the Keswick movement), “the gift”, “the second blessing”. John Wesley – back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – talked about an enlivening and saving “second work of grace” which he experienced years after his ordination as Anglican priest.

It's undeniable, unarguable, that many long-time Christians do come into experiences which set them on fire for the faith, which seem to be all consuming, in which a description of being immersed deeply into the life of God, or into the Holy Spirit would be most apt. And certainly many people quite validly experience gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues. What is this that happens, and what has it got to do with our baptisms and what we're told about Jesus baptizing us with the Holy Spirit?

Scripturally and doctrinally, it's nonsense to assert that we could receive a bit of the Spirit at baptism, not the full measure, and then more later. Nor is there consistent scriptural evidence of a two stage blessing or Spirit -filling in the Christian life. It's largely a matter of terminology, of how we can end up explaining the movement into being more fully alive and aware of God's Spirit at work in us. We might do better to think in terms of growing into –sometimes even capitulating into - a greater or new awareness of the presence and power of that Spirit in our lives. An analogy could be that when we meet someone, we meet the whole person, but the depth of who that person is, may be something we get to know progressively, if we're open to developing that relationship. Often, many people stop at the first meeting, at the symbolic immersion in water, failing to be open to or to develop the potential granted in that rite, failing to welcome and nurture the presence of God's Spirit in their lives. (Godparents – take note of the responsibility you undertake in your role to develop that potential, that life of the Spirit in your God child as he/she grows).

After our baptisms, it then becomes part of our journey with God regarding how we might inhibit or resist or be open to that life of the indwelling Spirit being more fully expressed and experienced and revealed or released in our lives.

If we open our hearts and minds to God in a conscious response, then we begin to experience that life of the Spirit in a different, more powerful way, and we can talk in a real sense of personal inspiration, vocation and gifting. And it's the Spirit who empowers and equips us for God's mission, whether that's in living the way of Christ, showing and being his light in our own homes and communities, or mission and ministry on a larger scale. We become channels of his working in us and through us, not robotically, but through our own willed cooperation with his power and purpose.”<sup>1</sup>

And, yes, the Spirit can be both the gentle nudging of God, the quiet assurance of his presence with us, as he/she can also be a power-filled, dynamic, driving presence, complete with giftings that we can neither fully comprehend or rationalize or ignore. But going deeper into God, allowing the work of the Spirit to take hold, doesn't necessarily mean Pentecostal-type experiences. It most certainly does mean greater evidence of the fruit of the Spirit –love, joy, peace and so on, and a greater awareness of the presence of God in and around our lives.

The question for each of us is: are we content to leave the Holy Spirit in a comfortable unchallenging place in our lives, or are we willing to open our lives to the deeper work of the Spirit –the powerful, baptizing wind of God?

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey John “The Content of the Catholic Faith” in *Living the Mystery*, Jeffrey John (ed), 1994, p.68