
Sunday 10 January – First Sunday of Epiphany

Readings: Acts 19:1-7 & Mark 1:4-11

Acts 19:1-7

Paul in Ephesus

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'

They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?'

'John's baptism,' they replied.

Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.

Mark 1:4-11

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

The baptism and testing of Jesus

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

Reflection

Where's the place you've dreamt of visiting but could never afford to go to? For me it would be to spend several months travelling through Africa, going to experience the wildlife of Madagascar, the sand dunes in Namibia, the beaches of Mozambique. Now imagine that someone pays for you to go and experience all that you've longed to see. But when you get there you decide to spend the time watching movies in your hotel room, eating in the restaurant, and lounging by the pool reading books. When you come home you feel refreshed, you've had a nice time, you enjoyed the hotel, but you can't help feeling you didn't make the most of the opportunity. You were being offered so much more but you didn't grab hold of it.

Many of us are living like this as Christians. We've received "John's baptism" - the forgiveness of our sins, the knowledge that we're saved, loved, and free in Christ. We pray regularly and read our bibles and we love God. That we are Christians is not in doubt. But there is so much more we could experience.

In the readings for today both John and Paul speak of baptism in the Holy Spirit. This "second stage" takes us to a deeper level of faith. It transforms our relationship with God into one where, through the Holy Spirit, we may receive gifts such as speaking in tongues or healing or prophecy. It helps us to be more in tune with God; more able to hear him speak; to be led by him; to pray in line with his will.

We will only "become" a Christian once but being filled with the Holy Spirit can happen over and over again. It is a free gift that is there for all who believe in Jesus but we need to hold out our hands and open our hearts to receive it. Whenever we feel we're running dry in our faith we can ask God to fill us anew with the Spirit. It can be something that somebody else prays for you or it can be you sitting in your chair at home just making the time and space to ask God to fill you with his Holy Spirit. You may feel instantly different or experience a sign such as shaking or crying or speaking in tongues. You might feel a little stronger, a little calmer, a little more loved, a little more excited about the future, a little more reassured about what God is saying to you.

Life as a Christian is full of wonderful gifts. Don't miss out on what God is offering you. Don't settle for the partial experience. Ask God to fill you with his Holy Spirit and see what happens!

Kerry Thomas