

The Rev. Philip Kissick

St. Mary the Virgin Edithburgh & St. James' Warooka

Baptism of the Lord, 10 January 2010

Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-22

The reading from Luke this morning anticipates Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit; that from Acts also relates the gift of the Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles the gift of the Spirit is multiform and not limited to baptism or any other event. It is simply that which ultimately goes with belonging to the people of God.

In the gospel reading we see the baptism of Jesus presented to us, and there are some distinctive elements in this gospel account.

Firstly, John does not baptise Jesus. Indeed, according to Luke John is already imprisoned. By doing this Luke separates Jesus even further from John the Baptist so that there is no sense of a linkage with John's disciples.

Secondly, the context of this baptism and gift of the Spirit is prayer. And throughout Luke and Acts this remains the case. It is present again in the passage we heard this morning from the Acts of the Apostles. It is a gift which flows from an intimate relationship with God and gives expression to that relationship. It is not linked to a specific sacramental act, nor is it linked to particular sorts of gifts – rather it is the gift of God in response to prayer, the natural result of a living relationship with God.

But if we come back to the stories themselves and ask ourselves what happened to Jesus and to the Samaritan disciples, we may get a hint of what happens to us. In Luke the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove, and a voice speaks affirming Jesus' identity.

In Acts 8, again in the context of prayer, the disciples travel from Jerusalem to Samaria, where they pray and lay hands on the Samaritan disciples in order that the Holy Spirit may descend on them.

The first similarity, as mentioned before is prayer. But there is also the transfer of power. In Jesus' baptism it is shown in the voice which speaks from heaven. In Acts it is through it being passed on by the Jerusalem disciples by the laying on of hands. Luke wanted to affirm the Jerusalem church as the fount from which the church grew, the original locus of authority for the church. So, the disciples travel from Jerusalem to Samaria. The laying on of hands was also a symbol of the giving of power – hence its use in ceremonial such as ordinations and coronations.

So, what is this gift of the Spirit? It is a public gift of power to be the children of God in the context of a living relationship with God expressed through prayer. And it is this that is given expression both in the baptism of Jesus and of the Samaritan disciples.

The story in Acts does not say exactly what it was that indicated that the Samaritans had not received the gift of the Spirit, other than that this news reached the Jerusalem church which responded. The sense is that it is unity with the rest of the church and the confidence and power to engage in mission – in other words, the capacity to be the church. Either the Samaritans themselves, or other Christians, sensed there was something lacking and so the void was filled.

But at its heart this gift gives expression to unity with Jesus and creates unity with fellow believers and the power to be the children of God.