

January 11, 2015

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, oh Lord...our strength and our redeemer.”

The Apostle Paul said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

I often think that one of the limitations in Christian Liturgy, and this comment applies right across mainstream denominations of the church, is that we only have time in our worship service for tiny snapshots of Holy Scripture and these snapshots are invariably out of context and use English words invariably not in common use.

In reality, if we pay any attention to the readings on a Sunday morning, we have to translate the words into an understandable form even before we consider the message.

The church year Lectionary is also constructed in such a way that it seems we get over exposed to certain characters and stories at various times in the church year.....and more often than not these individuals just did not get it...that Jesus Christ who has now come into the world is the Messiah.

Christians believe that prophecies in the Hebrew Bible (especially Isaiah) refer to a spiritual savior and we believe Jesus to be that Messiah.

As an aside ...Islamic tradition holds that Jesus, the son of Mary, was the promised Prophet and Masîḥ, or Messiah sent to the Israelites, and that he will return to Earth at the end of times, along with the Mahdi, and defeat al-Masih ad-Dajjal, the "false Messiah" or Antichrist.

So how do we make God's word through Holy Scripture more available to us. Firstly, using our new one page weekly insert we take sheet home and read the referenced scriptures from our own Bibles.....and read them not just once but two or three times to hear what God is telling us.

As a parish, Trinity, other than our small group on Wednesday mornings, to my knowledge, has no formal Bible Study groups. Karen and I held a Bible Study group in our home for more than ten years. We all learned an enormous amount during that time. There is no reason why such group could not be created in this congregation. We do not have to wait for clergy participation or leadership.

For those of us who experience Bible Study groups we experience the joy of the Holy Spirit raising our consciousness to certain words and what God means by them.....

Paul's journeys led him to Ephesus, an ancient Greek city on the coast of Ionia, just two miles southwest of present-day Selçuk in İzmir Province, Turkey. There he discovered a group of our Lord's disciples who had never heard of the Holy Spirit.

So, in preparing this sermon, I asked myself, Who is the Holy Spirit and why is He so important in our Faith?

For a long time I have felt very confident in my heart as to who the Holy Spirit is, in fact I believe I have encountered our Blessed Advocate many times, particularly in recent years. But how do I put these same feelings to words?

As Christians we believe The Holy Spirit is God. He is not an "it." Also the word "He" has no gender implication, it is simply identifying The Holy Spirit as a being rather than an object. He is not a divine influence. He is not a fleecy white cloud. He is not a ghost or a concept. He is a person possessing a will, intellect and emotions.

He is God -- with all the attributes of deity. He is the third person of the Trinity -- co-equal with God the Father and God the Son. There is only one God, but He manifests Himself in three persons, whom we call the Trinity.

The second question I asked myself is, "Why did God send The Holy Spirit and why was it so important that those disciples in Ephesus know about The Holy Spirit?"

The Holy Spirit came to glorify Christ and to lead believers into all truth. On the eve of His crucifixion while still in the Upper Room, the Lord Jesus said to the disciples, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

The Holy Spirit came to enable us to know Christ through a new birth and to give us the power to live and share the abundant life which Jesus promised to all who trust and obey Him.

The Holy Spirit inspired holy men of old to write the Scriptures. As you read the Bible, as I suggested earlier, The Holy Spirit reveals its truth to you.

At our Bible Study on Wednesday morning we read passages of Scripture that we have read many times before, and suddenly, at the moment one of us may need a particular truth, a certain passage comes alive. Why? Because the Holy Spirit makes the Word of God relevant and meaningful when we need it.

The Holy Bible is a living Book inspired by the Spirit, and only Christians who are filled with the Spirit can understand the true meaning of God's Word.

I pray and -- except for the prayer of confession -- I cannot expect God to answer my prayer unless I am walking in the Spirit. I witness, and no one responds unless I am controlled and empowered by the Spirit.

I cannot live a holy life apart from the help of the Holy Spirit for, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control."

A clergy colleague once said to me, "I don't like all of this talk about the Holy Spirit. I want to talk about Jesus Christ." I reminded him that that was the reason the Holy Spirit came -- to exalt and glorify Christ."

It is impossible to even know Christ apart from the regenerating ministry of the Spirit. It was Jesus of Nazareth, Himself, who said, "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

It is impossible for you to become a Christian, to understand the Bible and other spiritual truths, to pray, to live a holy life, to witness or do anything for the Lord Jesus apart from the person of the Holy Spirit of God.

It is my experience when we are gathered around the font for Holy Baptism, the presence of The Holy Spirit, is palpable. The calm almost soothing words of our liturgy....."I baptize you in the name of the Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit".

It is as if the very words "and The Holy Spirit" make the human process into part of the Divine. The individual being baptized is changed forever..... becoming an integral part of Christ's Kingdom here in this life.....and possessing qualities and abilities not seen by the world until that moment.

In the Epistle today, that is exactly what was missing from the disciples' experience at their baptism in Ephesus and which Paul completed by invoking the power of The Holy Spirit.

Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

On this the First Sunday of Epiphany, when we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, let us all reflect on what happened to each of us at the time of our own Baptism.

Even though most of us were babes or infants and cannot remember the event itself, nonetheless we know that The Holy Spirit entered us at that time and changed our lives forever.....and we are so thankful.....

Amen