



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

The Essential Spirit

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Epiphany 1: 7th January 2018

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We are at a stage of the church year when seasons change quite quickly. I kept reminding you through December that we were in Advent not Christmas. Then from Christmas Day we were into 12 days of Christmas until yesterday. So we have observed the season of preparation for the coming of the Messiah, then the celebration of our God taking on human form to be born as a baby. Now the season of Epiphany which is simply the Greek word for manifestation or showing. Through the weeks of Epiphany the church celebrates the fact that Emmanuel – God with us – was manifested to mankind both Jews and Gentiles.

The Feast of Epiphany was yesterday and its lectionary readings related to the coming of the Wise Men – the gentile representatives coming to honour the King. Today, the first Sunday of the Epiphany season retells the account of Jesus' baptism as an adult when he is anointed for ministry and presented to Israel. This is another, later, indeed more significant stage of his being shown to the world.

I have entitled this sermon, "The Essential Spirit", for the Holy Spirit has a prime role in each of the readings.

The reading starts with John the Baptist coming to the fore and calling Israel to repentance. I preached on the same portion during Advent so I won't go there again now. If you want to see what I said then, go to the church website to pick up a copy.

John has been baptising many Israelites as crowds have flocked to him. As he gave his stern message of the need to turn from sin toward God he also pointed to One who was to come. One who was extremely significant and of great status.

So we fast forward to verse 9 where "it came to pass" that Jesus comes to John and he too is baptised in the River Jordan. However, this baptism was unlike any before or afterwards. I have baptised a number of people by full immersion and we are a fairly staid culture so there is not a lot of drama. One can imagine that some of those who came to John would have been rather emotional. Some could have had an accident and swallowed water with some drama.

One time in Carlisle, the bishop and I were baptising people together. We had a portable immersion font in the chancel which had been filled by the administrator. But she had only filled it about 18" deep not understanding the dynamics of lowering a body into water and lifting it up again. The first candidate was a strapping 16 year old lad in the First XV – a substantial lad. As we lowered him to the horizontal, we were carrying all the weight with no flotation to help us until he was 18" off the floor. At the same time, I discovered that the plastic lining became extremely slippery when wet. The result was that my feet shot from under me

and the candidate and I both fell into the shallow water side by side. As I got my head above water, I heard the Bishop say, "Oh dear! I seem to have baptised the curate as well!" Seeing the candidate was floating on his back I reached over and pushed him under to complete the job.

I imagine John and his disciples could have had the odd accident as well. But with Jesus it was unique for a very different reason. Presumably he went into the water fairly normally, but when he came up everything changed!

The prophet Isaiah has possibly more to say about the coming Messiah than any other of the Old Testament prophets. Would John have thought of Isaiah 64:1 "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down ..." Because that is what happened... John saw the Holy Spirit come down from heaven and rest on Jesus. Mark tells us that Jesus saw an open heaven.

Ezekiel had written that "... the heavens were opened and [he] saw visions of God."¹ But Mark does not say the heavens were opened, he says Jesus saw heaven being torn open. This is dramatic stuff! The Greek verb used is *schizo* to tear, split, divide, separate. It is the word from which we get scissors and schism. The heavens were not merely parted – for what is opened may be closed, but what is torn is not so easily returned to its former state. We can infer heaven would be more open from then on. When Jesus comes out of the water all heaven breaks loose!

The site is pretty significant – there have been many great events at the Jordan River. Not all at the same point on the banks of course. But if we think back, Joshua led the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land – as with the crossing of the Red Sea, the waters were stopped so the multitude crossed on dry land.² Here the great prophet Elijah crossed the river with his assistant Elisha after striking the water with his rolled up cloak so that they parted for him.³ Then followed his ascent as he was taken from Elisha accompanied by chariots and horsemen of fire.

Some hours later the newly commissioned Elisha tested his powers by likewise parting the waters as he re-crossed the Jordan.

This is the background of the place – but with Jesus is greater. Whereas with Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, they opened the waters and crossed over. Jesus goes into the waters and heaven is opened!

This is not a little doorway opened into heaven – it is more like the drawing back of a curtain or a veil to allow another world or dimension to be seen. Instead of the river, gritty soil and crowds of people, Jesus would have seen into the throne room of heaven itself.

In addition to open heaven, the Holy Spirit was seen descending on Jesus like a dove. Did they see a dove? Is that what is intended? There is another explanation. I read years ago an article by a man whose father had kept doves. He said to him it was obvious that the description refers to the manner of descent. Doves land with a controlled vertical descent rather than swooping in to land the way most other birds do.

[Video]

The Genesis reading appears to be chosen because of the hovering of the Spirit of God over the earth as it is still being formed. There the Spirit was involved in the first creation which was spoiled by our sin. In the gospel reading, the Spirit hovers over Jesus and lands on him as he anoints Jesus for his role in the New Creation to prepare a people for God.

The Spirit coming upon him was the messianic anointing. Anointing with oil was used to commission kings and priests. The oil symbolised God's spirit coming upon the individual as he or she was commissioned for a role. In Jesus' case he was anointed not with the symbol but directly with the fulfilment of the symbol – the Holy Spirit himself coming down on him to equip and empower him for his role. This was then his anointing indicated by his title the Anointed, Messiah, Christ.

¹ Ez 1:1

² Joshua 3:16

³ 2 Kings 2:8 & 14

What would this anointing mean? Jesus himself tells us soon afterwards when he speaks at his home town Nazareth:

Luke 4:18-19 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

The third element of his baptism is the tender sentence from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."⁴

It draws on two Old Testament scriptures.

Psalms 2:7 "I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

This is a royal psalm indicating that Jesus is the Messiah King – the descendent of King David whom they have expected and longed for. This second source is from one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah

Isaiah 42:1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations."

This shows that Jesus is the suffering servant Messiah. Scholars had debated for centuries what person could fulfil that prophecy and now God has answered the question in the commission of Jesus. Whether creating a new world or anointing the Prophet, Priest King the Holy Spirit is essential for he is the operative presence of God in this material universe.

How does that affect us? Well, N.T. Wright the Bishop, scholar and theologian writes about the revealing of the open heaven and God's words to Jesus:

"A good deal of Christian faith is a matter of learning to live by this different reality even when we can't see it. Sometimes, at decisive and climactic moments, the curtain is drawn back and we see, or hear, what's really going on; but most of the time we walk by faith not by sight."⁵

Wright continues suggesting that Mark is saying to us:

"... look at this life [of Christ], and learn to see, and hear, in it the heavenly vision, the heavenly voice. Learn to hear these words addressed yourself. Let them change you, mould you, make you somebody new, the person God want you to be."

When we are born again, Christ lives in us by his Spirit. We also become part of the Body of Christ. Paul repeatedly refers to us Christians being "in Christ". That means what is said of him is said of us.

I think of it like an envelope. The envelope carries documents. Where the envelope goes the contents go. Christ is the envelope, his people are contained within him.

In this respect, one of Paul's stunning and profound theological statements is 2 Cor 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That is the thoroughness of his forgiveness, his cleansing, his justification of you and me. So completely has God forgiven our sins that he sees no sin on us but we have become the righteousness of Christ.

If you are in Christ, then the words addressed to Jesus at his baptism are also said to you since you are in Christ and have his righteousness: "You are my beloved child, my beloved daughter, my beloved son. I am delighted with you. I have great pleasure in you. I am well-pleased with you."

Can you allow those words to soak in to your maybe parched heart?

But there is more. We turn to the Epistle set some 25 years later to have it clarified to us that we too receive the Holy Spirit. Paul is on his third missionary journey and comes to Ephesus which is on the Aegean Coast of Turkey. There he finds some disciples. Paul initially thinks they are Christians, but apparently soon realised

⁴ V11

⁵ Wright N.T., 2002, *Mark for Everyone*, SPCK, London, page 6

something was wrong. So he asks them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed and then perhaps even more perplexed, “Well what baptism are you talking about?” It transpires that somehow they have heard John’s message been baptised with John’s baptism but never heard of Jesus and his ministry. Perhaps they were Jews who had made the great journey to Jerusalem for a feast encountered John while there but returned to Ephesus before Jesus came for his baptism and the subsequent events unfolded.

Paul preaches Christ to them, they believe and are baptised into Christ. Paul prays for them and they are filled with the Holy Spirit which as is often the case is shown by an outpouring of praise and prophesy in the known language and in spirit-inspired unknown languages.

The Holy Spirit is the one who woees us to Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us new birth – Jesus makes that clear when talking to Nicodemus. Paul says no one can say, “Jesus is Lord” without the Holy Spirit. There are four components of conversion: repentance, belief, receipt of the Holy Spirit and baptism. The four are usually together and not in a particular, fixed order.

The Spirit is given at conversion. However, we also see in the Bible multiple fillings with the Spirit. Nicky Gumbel gives the illustration of a gas powered boiler with just the pilot light burning. Then the main gas supply is turned on and the flame of the pilot light ignites the main burner and whoosh a great strong flame blazes to heat your water. For many of us we have the gift of the Holy Spirit (like the pilot light quietly burning in our lives). However, when a filling with Spirit comes, whoosh so does the power and the manifestation of the Spirit in our lives.

This is the same Holy Spirit who came upon Jesus when he was baptised. If we are to be disciples of Christ, if we are to do what he calls us to do – we need the infilling, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Know that as a Christian you are a beloved child of God. Know that He delights in you and seek the filling of his essential Spirit to enable you to live the life to which he calls you.