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# Preparing for the Spirit

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 22 September 2024

Psalm 54 • James 3:13-4:3,7-8a • Mark 9:30-37

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus on the road, walking through Galilee towards Capernaum. His disciples are with him, and Jesus is doing what he spends most of his three years of earthly ministry doing: teaching. Jesus is almost always teaching his disciples. It is at times an uphill battle for him. Here he tells them, again, that he is to be killed, and will rise again from the dead, but they don't understand him. Then, as they walk along, they argue among themselves "about who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34). When he asked them what they argued about, they were too embarrassed to tell him. This becomes another teaching moment, as he again tells them they must humble themselves — the last will be first and the first will be servant of all. He has told them this before, too. But they are slow to learn. It sometimes seems as if they are deliberately refusing to be enlightened.

Why, in the face of all this resistance, does Jesus continue to try to teach them? Why does he spend so much of his time with them?

I am being perhaps a little unfair to the disciples. They are not like you and me, at least in one respect: they have not yet received the Holy Spirit, and therefore they have not received the gifts of the Spirit. You will recall from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that there are "varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Cor 12:4); these gifts include wisdom, knowledge, faith, prophecy, healing, etc. God, working through the Holy Spirit, gives each of us one or more of these gifts, as God wills, and according to our faith. Those of great faith receive the most and the greatest gifts.

One of the early theologians, Cyril of Jerusalem, wrote:

The Holy Spirit adapts himself to each person. He sees the dispositions of each. He sees into our reasoning and our conscience, what we say, what we think, what we believe.<sup>1</sup>

The gifts we receive are customised for us by the God who created us. They are given through God's grace. Another early theologian, Ambrosiaster, wrote:

The varied gifts of the Holy Spirit and the grace of the Lord Jesus are the work of one and the same God. The grace and the gift cannot be divided according to the persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but must be understood as constituting the work of the undivided unity and nature of the Three.<sup>2</sup>

It is God, in all God's fulness, who provides gifts for God's people; and these gifts may only come from God. We cannot obtain them ourselves.

It may be, however, that Jesus was preparing the disciples to receive the special gifts which were intended for them, and which they would receive with the coming of the Spirit. The three years of Jesus' ministry were preparation for the disciples, in anticipation of the time when the gift of the Spirit would in a sense unlock that education and allow it to flower into the disciples' own ministry after the Resurrection. We read about their ministry in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, commonly known simply as Acts. There we see Peter, who denied Jesus three times and continually misunderstood his teaching, standing up boldly in the market square in Jerusalem to proclaim the Gospel:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him ... Repent and be baptised, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:22,38)

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechetical Lectures* 14.22, quoted in Bray, Gerald, ed, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 117.

<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, op. cit.

The change in Peter seems miraculous — and it is. It is due to the Holy Spirit, which Peter has accepted into himself, and who guides Peter in all he says and does. And not only Peter is changed, but all the disciples; and after them, all of those who gathered on that first Pentecost. The disciples, through the gifts of the Spirit, were then able to use the knowledge Jesus has given them. It became essential knowledge, now that Jesus had physically left them. It was God's will that they would first receive the teachings of Jesus, little by little, like babies learning to eat solid food, before they could come to maturity and receive their various gifts.

So it is with some of us, those who come to faith in later life. In my own case, the training and experience of the first 40 or so years of my life came to fruition when I accepted Jesus and received the Spirit at my baptism. My experience with speaking, writing, working with people, dealing with financial matters: all those things became activated to God's service as I joined God's church. I had to crawl in the darkness before I could walk in the light of Christ.

Thanks be to God, who orders all things for the good, and who equips us to be his servants in his great and glorious plan for the world. Amen.