

## **SERMON: Sunday – 9 January 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Swept up by the Holy Spirit and Fire**

Reading - Acts 8:14-17

Reading - Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

This Sunday's Scripture focus is the baptism of Jesus and especially the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Last week we were still thinking of Jesus the baby and the Christmas story, the Word becoming flesh. And now, the lectionary jumps some 30 years or so, to there baptism of Jesus, as if there isn't much to say about Jesus in those intervening years, other than that he grew in favour with God and with people.

Clearly, the HS makes at the difference in a believer's life.

The early church after Pentecost experienced the power and presence of the HS as the energy force that makes all the difference in life, that is the cause of life., the One who was there at the beginning, hovering over the waters ....

Hence the later use of the term "the Holy Spirit and fire", the fiery Holy Spirit who invigorates, purifies, and burns from the inside out.

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It's not until Peter and John "go down" to Samaria - in other words, I like to think they humble themselves, they go down - and commit to pray for their former enemies - that its after that things begin to happen in that foreign place, as had already happened in the homelands of Judea.

Peter and John laid their hands on the Samaritan believers and they received the Holy Spirit (17), just like Jesus had received the Spirit in his own baptism, which was only somewhere between 1 and 3 years earlier remember.

This is huge. Because God's kingdom is made up of people who were former enemies, now reconciled to each other, and this baptism that Jesus received

is now the baptism for all, the baptism that reassures people that they are loved as they are and not as they should be.

You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased (22).

God's kingdom includes rather than excludes. The Spirit works to bring people together, even people we might have previously excluded.

(SIDE NOTE SLIDE)

We used to fish for people. When did we become keepers of the aquarium? (Nona Jones) - I was struck by this doing the rounds on social media this week. Ouch!

I met someone this week, someone who, despite all the trauma in her life, really just wanted to know that she had not been forgotten, that she was loved, despite it all. I think I let her know that in the fumbling words we shared. I hope I did anyway. But what matters perhaps most was that I trusted that the Holy Spirit was present in our conversation and that was enough.

[SLIDE]

Jacqui Lewis, has written a book called "Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and Rule-Breaking Kindness That Can Heal the World" (New York: Harmony Books, 2021) - what a great title - in which she wrote:

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"If you want to know what love looks like, Rabbi Jesus is saying, here it is: Love crosses borders and boundaries; it makes new cultural rules; it cares for the stranger. Love turns strangers into friends. Fierce love is rule-breaking, border-crossing, ferocious, and extravagant kindness that increases our tribe.

. . .

In any relationship, fierce love causes us to cross boundaries and borders to discover one another, to support one another, to heal one another. When we do this, when we go crazy with affection, and offer wild kindness to our neighbour across the street or across the globe, we make a new kind of space between us. We make space for discovery and curiosity, for learning and growing. We make space for sharing stories and being changed by what we share."

In so many ways life is a shared struggle - we can't do it alone, indeed we're not made to go it alone - we need each other. The body of Christ is a shared enterprise - the work of the Holy Spirit - working to draw people together and build people together on the foundation of love.

If we think about it long enough we see that in so many ways our lives are built upon the foundation that others helped build for us - in most cases our parents who taught something of what love looks like, our brothers, sisters, spouses, children even. The Spirit moving in lots of different ways through different people.

And so in turn can we be a foundation for others' lives. I heard someone speak about this on the radio this week, how a foundation is the bit in a building that's not seen but is so crucial to the rest of the building. Without it, the building would collapse.

So much of our lives are built on foundations which are not seen - just as God is the divine foundation in our own lives, the bit that isn't seen, the Wind that blows where it wishes and in whose dance we're invited to be swept up in and carried forward.

It's a privilege when we get the opportunity to share moments with other people when the Spirit blows where she will, when we make ourselves available or simply find ourselves caught up in that divine dance.

For we are not in control of the Spirit but are invited to join in the ongoing flow of the Spirit of Love between Father and Son, Divine and human.

In the words of Richard Rohr, "Jesus' message to us is clear: don't ever try to control the Spirit and say where it comes from, where it goes, or who has it. It's called group narcissism whenever we say our group is the only one that has the Spirit or the Truth. Every group at less mature levels will try to put God in their own pocket and say God only loves their group. Such a belief has nothing to do with the love of God. It isn't a search for Truth or Holy Mystery, but a search for control. It's the search for the small self, the search to make myself feel superior and to stand alone. I'm not in control or in charge of this Holy Mystery. I don't presume to understand. All I know is I'm forever being drawn—through everything—calling for surrender, communion, and intimacy."

It might be that the fire has become like a smouldering wick in our lives. If that's the case then let's pray that the Holy Spirit will burst into fresh fire and re-ignite our hearts with love, the kind of divine love that has the capacity to change the world, the very same love we've heard about between the Father and the Son, now here to sweep us off our feet and get us dancing again.

Let us pray,

Great Spirit of God

Holy Fire

Breathe within our empty hearts

That we might be filled forever with love everlasting

And follow your leading all our days

In Jesus name

Amen.