Sunday 9th January 2022

Psalm 29. Luke 3: 15-17 & 21-22. Acts 8: 14-17

In Psalm 29 the psalmist writes that glory and strength should be ascribed to the Lord. But he writes “mighty ones”, which could refer to the angelic host or other gods. It is emphasizing that all of creation should acknowledge that God is the one, true, divine God.

In Luke we are told about people seeking John to baptize them. Do we believe that baptism is only for Christ followers? So why were the Israelites gathering for baptism, before Jesus had even been baptized, let alone begun his Messianic ministry?

Baptism was not an unusual sight – baptism (or immersion in water) is not a new Christian concept.

In Leviticus bathing was sited by the priests as a ritual required for purification, not simply hygiene but Spiritual cleanliness. It was to protect God’s sanctuary and showed God’s space to be holy and to show reverence.

John was the wonder in this passage. His speaking fervently of the coming Messiah. Prophecy that had been given over 300 years ago, now brought to the fore. John baptized for people to be purified for the coming presence of God, not simply before entering the temple.

We read that Jesus was baptized. For what purpose? He was not unclean. When He was baptized He identified himself with human sin and repentance. As an example and not out of necessity. But when He was baptized was He also ascribing glory and strength to the Lord?

When Jesus was baptized the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove. This was and is the Christian expectation.

So when we read that the new converts in Samaria had been baptized with water but not with the Spirit, which happened at a later date – Luke was flagging up something unusual – something that was typical or atypical?

This passage has caused division in what is being expressed. Some churches believe that this was expressing what SHOULD happen – hence why there is a baptism followed by a confirmation, whereby a bishop will lay hands on people – taking on the apostolic mantle. But what does scripture tell us?

Acts 2: 38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, 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”.

This says nothing about laying on of hands or a delay in receiving the Holy Spirit. So, what was happening in Samaria?

Could it be that the Samaritans had accepted Philip’s teaching on an intellectual level only – accepted the WORD of God, not truly taken Jesus into their hearts? I do not think so.

We need to understand a little about the chasm between Jews and Samaritans. Again, we are removed from the culture of the time, so the significance of Philip even preaching the gospel in Samaria is partially lost on us.

Samaritans were Jews, but they had strayed from the orthodox teachings in the time of the kings. Samaritans only had Pentateuch as scripture. They had removed themselves from the rest of Israelites, considered by them to be heretical outsiders for over a 1000 years, to the point that they were only one step away from being Gentiles.

Perhaps God had withheld the baptism of the Spirit for a reason. The fact that two apostles, Peter and John, were sent from Jerusalem is important. It was not the norm for new converts to have visits from apostles to impart the Holy Spirit. Could you imagine how busy they would have been?

But Peter and John simply laid hands on people and prayed for them and then the Holy Spirit was imparted. They did not teach them anything further, hence why I do not think that it was a reflection that Philip had only taught them head knowledge.

So, what was the significance of this action of laying on of hands? It is not a prerequisite for receiving Holy Spirit, but did show that the prayers were for individuals, not simply a job lot. God – Jesus – sees us as individuals and rejoices over each one of us being redeemed.

When Peter and John, apostles of Christ and anointed as His messengers, laid hands on the new Samarian converts, it showed that they

 were being accepted as bona fide Christians into the redeemed community, on exactly the same terms as Jewish converts.

Baptism is always one stage, as in the words of Peter before - “Repent and be baptized, 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.”

The Holy Spirit is always imparted. The manifestation of the Spirit will differ in each person, and the experiences will differ. But the Holy Spirit is always imparted to guide us, to act as a witness of Christ in our life and learning, to take us into deeper experiences, to gain more knowledge, to build our faith.

As a Baptist I believe in the baptism of full immersion. It is a public declaration of your acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. It is a tangible and metaphorical way of showing that you have confessed your sin, that as you go into the water you repent and that your desire is to be washed Spiritually clean and re-emerge clean in the presence of God.

Repentance and forgiveness are not dependent on this act – it is just a public declaration, and an ancient priestly act of purification. But I believe that it is a powerful act.

Whatever your belief, just know that if you repent, acknowledge Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And for us who have received the gift, however many years ago that may have been, that we do not fold it up neatly and place in a cupboard like we have done with our Christmas jumpers – but give Him the honour He deserves, to continue to rely on Him and be guided by Him.