

Reflection for podcast

Acts 19:1-7

In the first seven verses of Acts chapter 9, the Apostle Paul meets a group of believers who know the baptism of John but have yet to hear that there is a Holy Spirit, or so we are told. It is right to be a little cautious, because opponents in an argument don't always fully understand or fairly represent one another. Just think of the twisted narratives we have heard from the US concerning the presidential election, and the Georgia state run-offs. Even so, the violence on Capitol Hill on Wednesday was a salutary reminder that it matters that the truth be told, and that false narratives are corrected.

We know from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that there were parties among the early Christians there, and that those who were of Apollos opposed others who claimed to be of Paul or even of Christ.

Given the mention at the start of our reading that Apollos is out of the way as the Apostle Paul enters the scene at Ephesus, it seems that Paul sees an opportunity to put a few things right. One commentator, suggests that the story tells of the 'annexation of the disciples of John the Baptist.' This view of the matter hints at an intriguing idea -- that the transition from John the Baptist to Jesus may not have been quite as straightforward as some of the familiar Bible stories suggest.

Alternatively, we can take the story presented in Acts at face value and join our narrator, Luke, in pointing the finger at the eloquent and learned preacher Apollos. From the previous chapter we learn that Apollos was effective in persuading Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, but that he left out some key teaching that Luke and Paul regarded as vital.

There is something curious about today's bible reading - something that doesn't quite fit -- amplifying the suspicion that Apollos is not being fully understood by his opponents.

Who could really have known about John the Baptist and yet be unaware of the Holy Spirit? Recall how the heavens opened at John's baptism of Jesus, and the Spirit descended like a dove. It is a memorable epiphany, an act of creation and revelation reminiscent of that at the very beginning of Genesis. In that primal narrative the wind, or spirit of God hovers over the face of the waters at creation. The Spirit is there from the beginning.

And what admirer of John the Baptist could be unaware that this roughly clothed proclaimer was a desert dweller like Elijah, who like Elisha inherited the prophetic mantle? John was one who knew that Jesus would bestow the Spirit and fire -- and who himself was a fiery preacher who appeared to be Spirit-led.

Something has certainly gone wrong here. Either Apollos's message is being misconstrued, or this intelligent and fervent preacher was misguided, or possibly both. But amid the uncertainties notice something good: Luke's account in Acts assumes Apollos got it wrong, but also names Apollos's followers 'believers'.

Perhaps there is something here for you and me if we differ sometimes on points of faith and doctrine. It is still possible to use respectful terms of each other, even if we think the other person is in error. Whether believers or not, people sometimes find it hard to agree with those who are similar to us. Any distinction seems to matter, and we end up saying that the other person lacks the full gospel, or is simply wrong, when it may be that there are misunderstandings on all sides.

In today's reading Apollos is away in Corinth while Paul has entered the scene in Ephesus. Apollos could be described as the "elephant not in the room" or the cat who is away while the mice are at play with their new friend Paul.

To use another animal metaphor, there is no shortage of rabbit holes we could go down while speculating about the background to today's reading, but it is important to go beyond setting the scene. Instead let us pay attention to the heart of the matter for Luke and Paul: the Holy Spirit.

Last Tuesday a small group were looking at this Scripture reading and two of us remembered a Christian preacher by the name of Bob Gordon, who was a minister, Bible teacher and evangelist in the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

As a student attendee of his Durham congregation in the late 1970s, I remember that when preaching about the Holy Spirit Bob loved to refer to a particular brand of suitcase that is still around today. He would say that a Revelation suitcase is something that you can pick up and carry around, but that it comes into its own when you arrive at the point of opening it up so that you and others can benefit from the contents.

Taking that metaphor and applying it to today's passage notice that Paul opened up something revelatory for the believers that he encountered at Ephesus. After they had received Paul and the message that he brought, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Such signs, it is worth saying, are not obligatory for all Christians but in this story they serve the purpose of demonstrating that something new and exciting is taking place in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As I recall, Bob Gordon would teach that Revelation is first and foremost a breakthrough by the Holy Spirit. He would teach of the light of revelation that comes upon a believer when revelation opens up. The light becomes a part of a person, and when their knowledge and understanding of that light becomes fixed and sure it can be used and shared. That light of the Holy Spirit becomes hidden within and it becomes a guide to future action.

A metaphor from pre-digital photography where an image goes through a process of being developed and fixed can be compared to the process of receiving the Holy Spirit, so that the image of God's Word or Revelation is first fixed and then shown and shared. The Spirit flows through the life of individuals and communities with Scripture acting as the source of inspiration that brings spiritual understanding – that is the fixing process. That understanding opens up an ability to communicate not just facts about faith, but a spirit of freedom and liberty in sharing God's Word -- as it were opening the suitcase of Revelation.

On this understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, the effects of this communication are very positive. It takes the form of encouragement and strengthening of those who receive it. It takes the form of conviction when people are convinced of sin and righteousness and judgement. It takes the form of inspiration motivating people to serve in particular ways. It takes the form of guidance leading a person or community in the direction God intends.

Bob Gordon's preaching demonstrated a particular way of describing the person and work of the Holy Spirit which helped to influence many lives, my own included. There are other traditions within Christianity of how to understand the Spirit at work, such as the language of divine energies. There are ways of describing the charisms adopted by particular Christian orders and movements – for example a calling to be educators; or to be health workers; or to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation; or to preach the preferential option for the poor. All of these are about the flow of the Spirit and indicate that God's revelation is not static but brings change and renewal to persons and to a world that is in great need. In many and various ways the Spirit is moving.

It would be perfectly possible to read and study today's passage only to learn more about Paul and Apollos, Corinth and Ephesus and the so-called Johannine Christians. Such a study is honourable and perhaps helpful too. We might admire someone who has gained that kind of Bible knowledge, but unless it also says something about the flow of the Spirit, we might want to say in the spirit of Paul's teaching, "you know your Bible, and much about John and Apollos and Jesus, but do you know and experience the person and work of God's Holy Spirit, alive and active today?"

As we experience lockdown again, I hear broadcasters and individuals bemoaning a lack of hope and focussing on the real sense of loss and bereavement attending these times. But what an opportunity this is to receive and demonstrate the flow of the Spirit of light and life, the Holy Spirit of God! Many of the things people value are being called into question, and existence itself is put on the line by the pandemic.

Now is a good time to rethink our lives.

Now is a good time to open up to a new reality that flows from God's enabling.

Now is a good time to welcome encouragement, conviction, inspiration and guidance.

John the Baptist recognised the significance of Jesus as he saw the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descending.

Let us pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit today so that despair may turn to hope, hate to love and unbelief to faith, for our good and that of the church and of the world.
Amen.

