
Receive, Believe, Become

Acts 10.44-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 21 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

It's sometimes said there are two kinds of people: those who believe there are two kinds of people and those who don't. There may, nonetheless, be two kinds of Christians: those who hear the words 'Holy Spirit' and think 'Praise the Lord, at last someone's talking about the power of God' and those who hear the Holy Spirit and think 'Help – I'm going to be expected to make strange noises or speak in tongues or sing music that doesn't have four part harmonies or go to services that last over two hours.'

After the four gospels we have in our Bibles a book called the Acts of the Apostles. In some ways it might be a little easier to understand if the four gospels were renamed the Acts of Jesus and the Acts of the Apostles were renamed the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit is principally about one thing and that thing is making Jesus present. The Holy Spirit makes present the Jesus of the past and the Jesus of the future. The Jesus of the past is the Jesus who was born, was baptized, was tempted, called disciples, taught, healed and confronted those who oppressed the people of God, who was arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified, who was raised, appeared to many, and was taken up to heaven. The Jesus of the future is the Jesus who will come again, who will unite heaven and earth in a new realm of joy and perfect freedom, in an unending relationship with God the Trinity, in which all creation will worship God, be his friends and share his banquet. And the Holy Spirit makes the Jesus of yesterday and the Jesus of forever present today in regular and surprising ways. The regular ways are in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, in the practice and experience of personal and corporate prayer, in the reading of scripture and in gestures of mercy and kindness. The surprising ways are in the wise words of a stranger, in the apparent disaster that turns out for the best, and in the way God seems to work through the most surprising people.

But because a lot of Christians are rather scared of the Holy Spirit, I'm going to set out today three key words that express how the Holy Spirit works in the Church, and particularly how that work relates to baptism and confirmation.

The first key word is 'receive'. This is a word that makes it absolutely clear that God is not our poodle. The Holy Spirit comes according to its own calendar, not ours. The Holy Spirit is not a puppy that we can train to walk or sit or lie down when we shout the right command. A former colleague of mine spent some time serving a church in Ghana. Like North Carolina, Ghana gets very hot in the summer, but unlike North Carolina there's not much in the way of air conditioning. It so happened that the church didn't have enough money to put any glass in the windows. This had the advantage that it let a bit of air in. The only problem was that there was also quite a strong breeze, so they found that when they brought papers into the church the papers blew all over the place. Eventually they decided that having the wind blowing through the church was intolerable so they got together enough money to put glass in all the windows. The result was simple. The wind blew the roof off.

The lesson is that you can't dictate how the Holy Spirit will act in the Church. The Holy Spirit is to be received, not grasped. It sets its own agenda. A number of years ago I was the pastor of a small congregation in a socially disadvantaged part of eastern England. A visitor came to the church one Sunday, and since we had only 15 or so adults, we were quick to spot a visitor. But this visitor had a rather fixed notion of what it meant to be a church, and he found our service very confusing. My sermon followed the scripture passage very closely, but we had candles on the altar. We sang simple choruses led by a guitar but I wore traditional vestments. The visitor stayed afterwards and asked me, with a frown on his face, 'What kind of church *are* you?' I thought the best thing to do was to ask Huggy. Huggy had been part of the church for several years. He was of mixed race, had held a number of jobs and known a good bit of unemployment, and was universally recognized, partly because he weighed over 250 pounds. I said 'Hey, Huggy, our visitor wants to know what kind of church we are'. Huggy paused to think, and then said, 'Open to God'.

Open to God. That's what it means to receive the Holy Spirit. Huggy's church didn't have preconceived ideas about what God could or couldn't do. The Acts of the Apostles takes us through a series of encounters with people who challenge what the Holy Spirit can or can't do. First there's the Ethiopian eunuch, a Gentile man mutilated but in the wrong way. He comes into the kingdom. Then there is Saul, a Pharasaic persecutor of Christians. He comes into the kingdom. Then there's Cornelius, a Roman commander who was both a Gentile and a member of an army that kept the Jews from restoring God's promise. Cornelius too enters the kingdom. The only issue is whether the believers can keep up with the wildfire work of the Holy Spirit.

This is the scary ministry of the Holy Spirit – dramatic, sudden, surprising. Something we can only receive. But there's another kind of ministry of the Holy Spirit, for which I use the word become. Once there was a rich man. He met and fell

in love with a young maiden. She was lovely in form, and lovelier still in character. He rejoiced when he saw her. Yet he grieved also. For he knew that he was not like her. His face was hideous and his heart was cruel. He considered how he could win her hand.

Eventually he hit upon a plan. He went to see a mask maker. He said, 'Make me a mask that I shall become handsome. Then, perhaps, I may win the love of this noble young woman.' The mask maker did as he was bid. The man was transformed into a handsome figure. He tried hard to summon a character to match. It was sufficient to win the heart and hand of the fair maiden, and they were married. Ten years of increasing happiness followed. But the man knew he was carrying a secret. He sensed that true love could not be founded on deceit. He had to know if his wife really loved him, if she loved the man behind the mask. So one day, with a heavy heart and trembling hand, he knocked a second time on the mask maker's door. 'It is time to remove the mask', he said. He walked slowly and anxiously back to his home. He greeted his wife.

To his astonishment, she made no comment, nor showed any untoward reaction. There was no scream, no horror, no revulsion. He searched for a mirror. He looked – and saw no ugliness but a face as handsome as the mask, a face so different from his original face. He was amazed and overjoyed – but bewildered and confused. He ran back to the mask maker to find some kind of explanation. The mask maker said, 'You have changed. You loved a beautiful person. You have become beautiful too. You have become beautiful through loving her. You become like the face of the one whom you love.'

The Acts of the Apostles is not just a story of the sudden, spontaneous acts of the Holy Spirit. It is also the story of how people who love Jesus become like Jesus, the story of the slow formation of a community of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, oppressor and oppressed, of the slow becoming of the body of Christ out of a people who had known so many dividing walls of hostility. The Holy Spirit is about receiving, but also about becoming.

And in the tradition of churches that practice infant baptism, we call the receiving part baptism and the becoming part confirmation. Of course baptism is a sacrament the parents think about long and hard, but tell that to the baby. The baby feels the full force of the sudden action of the Holy Spirit – splash. The young people standing before us today didn't decide to be baptized. Baptism was something they simply received. But they did decide to be confirmed. Confirmation names these young people's consent to a long process, already begun, and not yet finished, by which the Holy Spirit enfolds them into the body of Christ – in which they wear the mask of Christ's beauty, but have not yet fully become like the face of the one they love. Baptism and confirmation belong together because they reflect the two contrasting aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit – the sudden and the gradual, the part God does alone and the part in which we have a significant role to play, the kind we simply receive and the kind we slowly become.

But I have missed something out. I've missed out the bit between the sudden and the gradual, between receive and become. It's a bit of both. It has the 'be' of become and the 'eive' of receive. Believe. Believe in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, incarnate on earth and ascended into heaven, Son of God and Son of Man. If receive means being tossed a set of football clothes, believe means putting them on and become means running out with the team onto the pitch to play. The Holy Spirit, remember, is always and only about one thing – making Jesus present. Whether it's dramatic, like the roof blowing off in Ghana, or gradual, like the man's face changing under the mask, it's always about Jesus. And that means it's always about faith. Faith is a gift, coming from outside us – we can't make it happen. That's the 'receive' bit. But faith is also something we grow into, by being surrounded by people whose lives show us what God can do. That's the 'become' bit. Receive, believe, become.

The Acts of the Apostles teach us not to get too hung up about the order. Sometimes the receive bit comes first, as on the day of Pentecost. Sometimes the believe bit comes first, as in today's story about Cornelius' household. Sometimes the become bit comes first, and people seem to be living like Christians when they have neither been baptized nor had a dramatic experience. Don't worry about the order. Too much angst has been spilt over the order. There's no definitive order.

But do ask yourself, which one of these do I find most uncomfortable? Do I find the receive part the difficult bit, because I like to be in control of God and don't like surprises? Or do I find the believe part the hard bit, because I like drama and I sense I'm growing into a community of passion and transformation, but I do find the details about Jesus elusive? Or do I rather find I stumble over the become part, because I like what Jesus has done for me, but I struggle to turn that into participation in a community of discipleship?

Whichever part you find uncomfortable, do two things today. Have the grace to thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit he *has* given you, and for the fruits that the Spirit has borne in your life. And don't be too shy to ask for those gifts that the Spirit still has in store for you. Ask for them now. Gifts. Faith. Fruits.

People of God, receive the Holy Spirit. Receive. Believe. Become.