

Finding a Voice

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Sources: Mark 1.4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Acts 19.1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Reading this brief passage from Acts, it seems as if we have stumbled into a quintessential moment in church history. People together in a community, attempting to be Christians, trying with sincerity to follow what the writer of the Book of Acts calls the Way of the Lord. And what do they do? Argue with each other. That's not the right baptism, you have to do it this way, the other guy had it wrong, says Paul.

A bit more background may be helpful. The 'other guy' is Apollos, who is identified just a few verses before this as a Jew from Alexandria, *an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures*. We are told that *he had been instructed in the Way of the Lord, and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, [though he knew only the baptism of John]*. He was evidently considered quite a compelling preacher, and the community leaders Priscilla and Aquila had him over to their house to share their understanding of the new faith. The Christians at Ephesus encouraged him when he wanted to go on teaching in Greece, and they wrote letters commending him to the Christians at Corinth. It is while Apollos is in Corinth the Paul appears again in Ephesus. And Paul critiques his colleague. Tell me about your baptism, he says to the Ephesians, did you receive the Holy Spirit? The listeners are sincere and open-minded – they are interested in hearing everything that will make this new faith stronger and more concrete. "Receive the Holy Spirit?" they exclaim. The moment is almost comic. "We don't even know about the Holy Spirit!" So this time they are baptised differently, in the name of Jesus. And the result is that they speak in new ways and prophesy.

One of the most fruitful approaches to reading scripture is to say that we are eavesdropping on a conversation that they were having two thousand years ago. A conversation in this case about Jesus and John, and about baptism and its meaning. Rhetorically, today's reading is part of a larger pattern in the New Testament by which the reader is reminded again and again that John has been superseded by Jesus, that followers of John ought to become followers of Jesus, because that is what John said. That is a clear message in the passage from Mark that Tina read, and it is repeated in the three other Gospels as well as here. Evidently, part of the missionary task in the first and second century when these letters and books were being written, was to gather in the followers of John, and to blend the insights and energy of that movement with the newer Christian groups.

This constant working and reworking of understanding and practices is exactly what gives vitality to any religious tradition. It is the motor of a new faith and

the sustaining power of an established institution. We see that in the Christian followers here – they are game for new information, willing to try a different approach. Sometimes leaders aren't quite as open-minded, and try to impose a rigid doctrine, or practices that are cut and dried. How easy we find it to discredit someone else's experience or insight, to shut down a new voice.

But it is the nature of the religious life of a community to be like an open-ended conversation. And for a conversation to thrive each participant must find a voice. This is part of the logic of the season of Epiphany. From the celebration of Christmas through to the beginning of Lent, we hear stories about the many ways God appears. Some years ago, Alydia talked to the children about thinking of Epiphany as a kind of light bulb – that when a light bulb goes on, you can suddenly see something that you couldn't see before. It is all these 'new seeings' – the ones we read about in the Bible and the ones we experience ourselves – which become the topic of our conversations.

In order for our own faith to flourish we must be engaged somehow in the conversation about what we have seen, and what we have understood, and what we have wondered about. This is where Paul's insistence on a new kind of baptism is so insightful. The old baptism was fine. As we are told, it involved self-reflection, penitence and forgiveness of sins. Instead of going to the temple to perform a ritual of animal sacrifice, John's followers were invited to present themselves for what was called a baptism of repentance. Clearly a meaningful and profound experience. But what Paul here insists on adding is the action of the Holy Spirit. And what the Holy Spirit does is bring new voices.

In the first instance, at Jesus' baptism, the Spirit ushers in God's voice to affirm and bless. The same voice that spoke creation into being has affirmed that this is the Beloved, the one who the people have been waiting for. Then later at the baptisms of the followers in Ephesus, it is the followers themselves whose voices are unleashed. Paul is saying that baptism is not only a one-way street, in which followers approach God – God's grace reaches out to empower the followers with new understanding, a new way of speaking and a new way of seeing the future. "Speaking in tongues" is an awkward concept for many of us, but the voices that the Holy Spirit brings aren't necessarily strange languages – the Holy Spirit brings a voice of compassion, helps us speak the languages of delight and caring, gives us powerful new vocabulary about justice and about following.

So the Christian enterprise is affirmed as a conversation, sometimes cacophonous, sometimes full of laughter, sometimes argumentative, sometimes in song. Because we usually baptise infants at Bloor Street, we tend to emphasize the welcoming, blessing aspect of this lovely sacrament, rather than the speaking. But the promise we make to live out our baptism is a promise to be part of the ongoing conversation about faith.

Writer Barbara McAfee encourages us to cultivate vocal presence. “You take your place at the end of a long line of ancestors who sang their songs, spoke their stories, struggled to stay alive and prevailed, so that you could add your voice to the chorus of humanity.” It is these new voices of ours, voices stirred up by the Holy Spirit, that we offer on this baptism Sunday.

Let us pray,

Loving God, Holy Mystery in which we live, it is your spirit that gives us our voice, your energy that carries the conversation forward. May our voices be made stronger by your spirit of compassion and humanity. May we live out our baptism. Amen.