

**Acts 8:14-17 Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit after prayer from Peter and John
Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22 The Baptism of Christ**

How can we consistently expect God's unexpected?

Many of us don't like surprises. (Bang!)

I'm one of them, though they are easier to deliver than they are to receive.

I prefer to follow a plan, keep a careful diary and stick reasonably closely to what it says. Similarly, I like to have a place for everything, and everything (roughly speaking) in its place. That's what I call home. Spontaneity is stressful and it bothers me, which may or may not be a good thing?!

If we look at our scripture passages for today, what are the things that surprise us? Do we see a God of consistencies or one who works more spontaneously?

The person John the Baptist expects to be so powerful that he can discern immediately who he'll gather around him as "good wheat", and who he'll destroy as "wasted chaff", lines up for baptism with a bunch of sinners! Does that surprise us?

In this account of Jesus' baptism, Jesus is given the reassurance of his divinity through the presence of the Holy Spirit, immediately after his baptism. In the baptism story from Acts, the Holy Spirit only comes to those whom Philip had baptised, weeks or even months after the event when they are visited by other apostles. Do the differences in the timing of the Spirit's blessing surprise us?

Does it surprise us that God doesn't feel the need to act with consistency? Surely in Jesus, we should see God as "the same, yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8)?! Where is the continuity within scripture, and why the surprises?

Jesus comes from a line of men who had great faith and courage. If you read the passage immediately after today's Gospel, there are many names in Christ's family tree that we don't recognise. But there are others whom we do recognise - for their personal flaws, their patchy heroism, and for sometimes giving in to competing interests: David, Jacob and Abraham among others. Just like us, Jesus was born *from* as well as into a world where sin is systemic - part of its fallen nature. Just like us, everything that our 'God made man' would say and do, not least his saving purpose and action, would be impacted by the tragic brokenness the world.

And yet, in his desert experiences as in all Jesus does, his will is aligned to God's, his choices are the sinless choices. We must assume therefore that these include his

desire to be baptised by John. But why should he? Because Jesus is showing that the power and holiness that he brings into the world stands against the way the world divides one person from another in the way John the Baptist had suggested when he spoke of the wheat and the chaff. Yes, Jesus *will* come again to judge the living and the dead (2 Tim 4:1) but that was *not* the purpose of his incarnation, which was God's way of making known his love and grace, drawing all people to himself on the cross (John 12:32).

Salvation being completed in Christ's resurrection and ascension, God's Spirit becomes the dominant means through which he is active among the people he is drawing together. The Samaritans are the next target for that unifying love and grace. Ostracised from their Jewish cousins by the sins of their shared history, they are reached and baptised by Philip because he is escaping the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. Yet, we're told they do not receive the power of the Holy Spirit until other other apostles come among them.

Does this make the Samaritans second-class Christians? Of course not. When Peter is convinced by the Holy Spirit to disciple the Gentiles, Cornelius and his family receive the Holy Spirit, but their baptism with water comes second (Acts 10:44-48). Differently again, when Paul arrives in Ephesus and baptises with water in the name of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is conferred at the same time (Acts 19:1-6). In each case, and through different people, God is drawing to himself people from all nations and creeds. The love and grace of God abounds to all, but the Holy Spirit is neither consistent nor controllable by Jesus' human disciples.

Our own Baptisms will have been experienced differently. We may not remember our infant baptism though some of us will remember affirming the same promises at Confirmation when a Bishop asked God that we would know the power of the Holy Spirit. Others may have been baptised as adults, possibly by full immersion. Some like me, will have changed tradition or denomination and renewed our baptismal vows at various points in our lives, experiencing God's Holy Spirit differently on each occasion. Others will have encountered the Holy Spirit whilst in a queue, a hospital, or in some other context entirely, and only then sought baptism into the Christian faith.

The consistency of God's love and grace draws many different people into a unity of shared faith. But the diversity of their backgrounds and experience is important. It can only be gained if we expect the unexpected of the Holy Spirit. Yet there is a consistency to be found in what it is that is required of us, to enable the Holy Spirit to do its inconsistent work in the world. We need to pray.

After his baptism, Jesus was affirmed as God's Son, whilst in prayer. When Peter and John came to confirm Philip's work in Samaria, they prayed that those who had been baptised might receive the Holy Spirit. Both Peter (Acts 10:9) and Cornelius (Acts 10:30) were praying when they experienced the visions that eventually brought them together, which led to the baptism of Cornelius and his family. Even Paul's laying his hands on the first Ephesian converts is symbolic of his prayer (Acts 19:6).

We cannot live in expectation of the surprising inconsistency of the Holy Spirit's work, unless we pray. Prayer is something that sounds - and in my experience is - deceptively hard work. Am I, as I scroll and faff through social media praying in any way for the circumstances of the people I am connecting with? I know that to pray I don't have to be on my knees, holding my hands together or in open supplication; in fact for me the former creates the distraction of pain, whilst the others can aid concentration or open-ness. We know that we can be praying silently whilst holding a perfectly reasonable conversation, and yet sometimes we need to take ourselves away from others so that we can hear the unexpected promptings of God's Holy Spirit.

We need to help each other to pray, which is why on Second Sundays we have prayer ministry during Holy Communion. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't seek to pray with each other elsewhere in the monthly pattern of our worship. PCC meetings start and finish in prayer, but are others praying for us as we gather? We are inviting all sorts of people from our community to meet with us when we consider the pattern of our mission and ministry at our Away Day later this month, but will we be praying for them as we explore our shared concerns for this community?

It shouldn't surprise us that we need to pray, because prayer has a consistent place in scripture, and in the example we've been set by Jesus and his disciples. Unless we pray, we will not find Jesus standing among those who come for baptism. Unless we pray we will not see people from different parts of our community drawn together in unity of purpose. Without prayer, the love and grace of God won't consistently be revealed in Eversley. Without prayer, there won't be any surprises.

(Bang!)