

The Spirit Untamed

Centuries ago, the church agreed to the text of what we now call the Apostles Creed, which includes as one of its shortest statements: “**We believe in the Holy Spirit**”. And yes, we do; though I suspect we find it easier to believe in the Holy Spirit when it ratifies what we know and what we believe, and it is much more difficult to believe in the Holy Spirit when it leads us on those roads we would be much happier to ignore.

Over the centuries the church has put a lot of effort in domesticating the Holy Spirit, we have tamed it, so it will make us feel comfortable, rather than challenged. And this is why I have not gone for the ‘expected’ reading of Acts 2 - I feel that too often we just stay with the “like fire, like wind” and the different languages, and lose the vision of what is really going on: opening in love to a new reality. I believe we have domesticated the Holy Spirit.

So, I have chosen this other reading from Acts 10-11; this reading is the final section that began in chapter 10, and it shows us the Holy Spirit in action, doing what it should be doing: challenging believers and the church to ways we might be happier to ignore. Today we read about The Spirit Untamed. And thanks be to God for this!

Here we find Peter in Jerusalem having to defend his actions to the church council, because they have heard that he had stayed in the home of Gentiles (ie uncircumcised people) and even eaten with them. Horror of horrors that was! Today’s Bible reading is all about Peter explaining what happened and why he did what he did. In short, Peter is saying: Blame the Holy Spirit! ***Is that possible? Well judge for yourselves...***

Peter begins – once upon a time, while in Joppa, while I was praying, I had a vision, a large sheet descending from heaven, filled with all the impure animals which we should neither touch or eat, and a voice from heaven saying: “**Peter, get up, kill and eat**”. God knows I was hungry, but I would never eat any of those animals, Leviticus 11 is quite clear about that. IT IS FORBIDDEN by the law. And then the voice from heaven saying -loud and clear: “**Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.**” Three times this happened, it must mean something thought Peter, and soon he was to discover that the voice was not only referring to those animals of the vision.

While all this was going on upstairs, downstairs three men arrived looking for Peter, they were Gentiles sent by a roman centurion named Cornelius. According to the religious law, Peter should have no contact with such people. And yet the Spirit had made it crystal clear that he should go with them, not only go with them but enter the house of Cornelius and even eat with him and teach them.

And while Peter was teaching down comes the Holy Spirit – “*as it had come on us at the beginning*” says Peter. This is the first time the Holy Spirit comes upon uncircumcised people, people that up until this precise moment would have been considered unclean, impure. How can the Holy Spirit come to people who had not been baptized? That is NOT the way things are done! Peter has now understood that the vision he had seen and the voice he had heard were not only talking about animals that could not be eaten.... This reading is a real turning point in the history of the church. **NOTHING** would ever be the same as from that day, and that is thanks to the Holy Spirit. The Untamed Spirit.

I suspect that if it had been up to us, we would have preferred the Spirit to be a bit more docile. Why upset the things that have always been the way they were? God’s message, as we have seen over the last weeks is that of limitless love, and so things had to change, they had to be inclusive, they had to be generous, they had to be kind. So, the question in front of us now is, how is this reading challenging us: what doors or windows must be pushed open by that same Spirit, that will lead us out of our places of comfort to meet others, or will invite others in to where we are? Who are those who are not part of our community? What decisions have we taken that have not allowed them to know they would be welcome? **WHAT** must change?

Well, for there to be meaningful change it needs to happen as we wait upon the guidance of The Holy Spirit. And this can happen in many different and unexpected ways. Often it will come through conversation, sharing fresh experiences and exchanging ideas with each other and with God, about how we can be a transforming church which is open and willing to take on new things done in and through the power and active presence of the Holy Spirit. Then, like those first people who experienced a fresh understanding of each other when the Spirit came amongst them, we could please God, become a new creation working in powerful ways for the good of Society.

Peter, the early community of believers, and why not...many people in the world today were desperate to keep things in order, as they had always been; that which they could call “normal”, and this reading today shows us God has different plans – God is creating something new and invites us to be open to this that some people call “a new normal”. It might seem too much, but clearly the Holy Spirit is showing us it is the only way: a new way.

The Spirit Untamed is still alive in the world today, let us pray that as Peter, we too can see, can understand, be transformed, and be changed, to follow the way it is showing us. May the Untamed Spirit continue to challenge the people of God today, and that we understand we are included in this. Amen