

THE HOLY SPIRIT TRANSFORMS

Today's Text: Acts 2: 1-47

Extracts:

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance... Then those who gladly received [Peter's] word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them [Acts 2: 1-4, 41].

*In early January 2011, a web producer for **The Columbus Dispatch** newspaper spotted a homeless man standing near the exit ramp off Interstate 71 in Ohio, USA.¹ The beggar carried a cardboard sign saying that he had a "God-given voice" and asked motorists for help. The reporter came back and recorded an interview with the homeless man, Ted Williams, then aged 53. Having lost his job as a radio announcer over 20 years earlier, due to alcohol and drug addiction, he had lived in shelters and on the goodness of alms givers. The reporter put the video on YouTube and within days, it attracted more than 8 million hits. Soon after, Williams became a global celebrity with multiple job offers in broadcasting and advertising. In November 2011, New England Cable News announced that Williams had joined them as the official voice of the New England cable channel and would be working out of his at-home studio in Dublin, Ohio.*

Williams moved from zero to hero in a moment. That is a transformation. But was it by his own effort? Had he not squandered his natural talents in the past? Where is the guarantee that he could handle success without relapsing again? There is a better and more lasting transformation that only God can give us. In this week's Bible story, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples of Christ and transformed them overnight into global heroes of all times. There is something there for us as we strive to be Spirit-led in a wayward world. Read on!

¹ Story based on the following sources: "Homeless man with 'golden voice' given second chance," BBC News, Jan. 6, 2011; Jan. 6 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12126725>; Mara Gay, "Reporter Who Discovered Ted Williams Covers the Homeless," AOL News, Jan. 6, 2011; <http://www.aolnews.com/2011/01/06/reporter-who-discovered-ted-williams-covers-the-homeless> and "Ted Williams (voice-over artist)," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Williams_%28announcer%29

1. Introduction: What a diverse group!

Soon after Jesus had ascended into Heaven, we are told that His disciples returned to Jerusalem where they stayed in an upper room. Altogether, they were about 120 persons in number. Those identified by name were “Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James” plus “the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and ... His brothers” [Acts 1: 12-15]. Have you ever studied the profile of that diverse group? Here is an interesting sample:

- Galilean fishermen

Peter, James and John were the most prominent in this group. Peter was introduced to Jesus by his brother, Andrew [Jn 1:40-42]. He was not highly educated [Acts 4:13]. Married [Mk 1:30; 1; Cor. 9:5], he lived by fishing [Matt. 4:18]. Previously known as Simon, the son of Jonah [Matt. 16:17; Jn 21:15], Jesus changed his name to Cephas (Peter) which means “a stone” [Jn 1:42]. Where he was strong, nobody could beat him. For example, he had the energy to fish all night even without a catch [Lk 5:5; Jn 21:3-4], or he could row for hours against strong winds [Mk 6:47-48]. However, when he faced overwhelming odds, he was cowed, afraid and vulnerable. He denied Jesus thrice [Matt. 26: 69-74], but as soon as he realized his sin, he wept bitterly [v. 75]. He could be impulsive where others were introspective, such as when he rebuked Jesus for wanting to go and die in Jerusalem [Matt. 16:21-23], or refused Jesus to wash his feet [Jn 13:6-10], or struck the ear of the chief priest’s servant when Jesus was being arrested [Jn 18: 10]. Ever inquisitive, Peter asked Jesus to let him walk on water only for him to be afraid when he was sinking. I wonder what happened to his fisherman’s swimming skills! However, he was a born leader and he made sure everyone around him knew it! For example, he asked Jesus or answered most of the daring questions [Matt. 17:4; Matt. 18:21; Matt. 19:27; Mk 8: 27-29].

James and John were brothers, the sons of Zebedee [Matt. 10:2]. They were fishermen by profession and Peter’s business partners [Lk 5:10]. They had a thriving business because they could afford paid employees [Mk 1:20]. As astute businessmen, they had acquired some managerial habits (good and bad) which they later put to work. Surnamed “Boanerges” (the sons of thunder) by Jesus, an indication of their fiery disposition [Mk 3:17; Matt. 10:2-4], they were the ones who asked for Christ’s permission to command fire to come down from heaven to consume the Samaritans for refusing to receive Jesus on His way to Jerusalem [Lk 9:54]. They were also ambitious and manipulative. With their mother’s connivance [Matt. 20:20-28], they asked to sit on the right and left of Jesus when He would come to His glory [Mk 10:35-44]. When that became known to their colleagues, it caused a major row, but for

Jesus' timely intervention [Matt. 20: 25-28]. John did not hide his special place with Jesus. Everywhere in John's Gospel, he refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" [e.g., Jn 19:26; Jn 20:2]. He was the one that Jesus sent to prepare the Passover [Lk 22:8-13]. During the Last Supper, John was "leaning on Jesus' bosom" [Jn 13:23], or "lying on Jesus' breast" [v. 25]. In fact, Peter had no choice but to pass questions to Jesus through John [v. 24]! No wonder that even after Christ's Resurrection, Peter's suspicion of John's ambition could have led him to ask Jesus what was going to happen to John if he (Peter) was going to be martyred [Jn 21:20-21].

- Tax collectors and sinners

Matthew was a tax collector when Jesus called him. For eating with him and other tax collectors, the Pharisees treated Jesus with disdain [Matt. 9: 9-11]. Look at the women who ministered to Jesus while He was on earth. They included "certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities- *Mary called Magdalene*, out of whom had come out seven demons, and *Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna*" [Lk 8: 2-3].

- Family

Apart from *Mary* who was understandably loyal to and supportive of her Son, Jesus, the Lord's earthly *brothers* were quite contemptuous of Him to the extent that Jesus "could do no mighty work" among His own relatives "because of their unbelief" [Mk 6: 1-6].

The above profile suggests that the group in that upper room included conniving and ambitious followers, full of themselves, envious of one another, etc. Do they not look very much like the rings of worshippers that surround and/or manipulate our church leaders today? But when the Holy Spirit came on them, those disciples became transformed!

2. But the Holy Spirit transformed them!

Under the Law of Moses, the Day of Pentecost (or the Feast of Weeks) is fifty days after the Feast of Firstfruits [Lev. 23: 9-16]. Jesus, the "Firstfruits from the dead" [1 Cor. 15: 20] resurrected on Easter Sunday (now the Christian equivalent of the Feast of Firstfruits). God is a perfect programmer. He chose the Day of Pentecost to manifest His Holy Spirit because Jews and proselytes (i.e., new converts to Judaism) had come from all over the then known world to Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks [Acts 2: 5-11]. Let us for a moment live their experience:

a) *They saw something!*

If you have been to the Holy Land, you will see different groups of pilgrims and tourists doing different things. Those that you pay attention to are the ones that can arrest your attention. In the case of the Pentecost experience, the sight was irresistible! The people saw a bunch of young and old men (and women) with “divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them.” The people were behaving as if drunk and spoke in languages that onlookers could understand, since they spoke in their own dialects. Some of them wondered, “Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?” While some of the onlookers were amazed, others mocked, saying that the disciples were full of new wine [vv. 1-9]. Of course, the disciples behaved and spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit [2 Pet. 1: 21].

b) *They heard something!*

As the onlookers wondered about what was happening, Peter, “standing up with the eleven” other apostles, raised his voice (there were no microphones then!) and spoke profound things to the people, namely:

- The disciples were not drunk but filled with the Holy Spirit, as prophesied by Jonah; that *in the latter days, God would pour out of His Spirit on “all flesh”*, such that young people would see visions, old people would dream dreams and servants and maids would prophesy; that “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” [Acts 2: 14-21];
- *Their Holy Spirit experience was actually about Jesus of Nazareth*, a Man attested to the people of Israel “by miracles, wonders, and signs” that God did through Him in their midst, as those visitors themselves would confirm [vv. 22-35]; and
- Therefore, all the house of Israel should know for sure that *God had made the same Jesus that they had crucified both Lord and Christ* [v. 36].

c) *And they did something!*

When Peter’s listeners had heard him, they were “cut to the heart” and asked him and his colleagues what they should do. He told them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The people responded right away and *about three thousand souls received Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and became Christians* [vv. 40-41]!

See the difference the Holy Spirit made in the lives of Christ’s disciples after their Pentecost experience. Peter, the not-so-educated, not-so-coherent, impulsive and quixotic leader became eloquent, coherent, fearless, calm and

humble [Acts 2:14; Acts 4: 5-13; Acts 12:6-7]. The scheming, ambitious sons of Zebedee fell in line behind Peter and accepted him as their leader [Jn 20:3-8; Acts 3:1-7; Acts 4: 1-21; Acts 8: 14-25]. After Herod Agrippa had killed James [Acts 12:2], Peter and John brought into the inner caucus James, the Lord's brother (son of Mary by Joseph) and he became one of the pillars of the early church [Gal. 2:9]. *The Holy Spirit transforms!*

3. Lessons for our own spiritual growth

What lessons can we learn from the foregoing for our own spiritual wellbeing? The following should be noted:

a) *The Holy Spirit determines how to manifest Himself*

On the Day of Pentecost, the only gift of the Holy Spirit that was manifested was speaking in tongues- in the languages of men [Acts 2: 11], not of angels [1 Cor. 13: 1]. Yet, Peter quoted from the book of Joel to refer to other manifestations of the Holy Spirit, such as dreams, visions and prophecies [Acts 2: 17-21]. Therefore, *it is the Holy Spirit, not believers, who determines how He will manifest Himself.*

For example, when Ananias came to Saul that had been struck blind after his encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus, he lay his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, he received his sight. Then, he arose and was baptized [Acts 9: 1-19]. He did not reportedly speak in tongues. On the other hand, when Peter went to preach Jesus to a Roman officer called Cornelius, the apostle was still speaking when the Holy Spirit fell on the officer and his household (apparently, they began to speak in tongues). Then Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord [Acts 10: 1-48]. So, do not allow anybody to mislead you that you must behave a certain way as proof of having received the Holy Spirit. *The true Spirit of God comes by inspiration, not divination [Acts 16: 16].*

b) *He manifests to facilitate God's work by Christ Jesus*

On the Day of Pentecost, God wanted the visitors from all the nations of the world to hear the Good News of salvation by Christ Jesus and take the message back home. That was why the people heard the disciples "speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God" [Acts 2: 11], not in a strange mumbo-jumbo that seems to be memorized and used in our churches today! *The Holy Spirit only manifests what can facilitate God's work, not what massages our human egos.*

For example, God filled Bezalel and Aholiab “with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” to enable them to build the Tabernacle exactly as God had shown it to Moses [Ex. 31: 1-11]. The same God gave Peter and John the spirit of boldness when they appeared before the Sanhedrin and on seeing “the boldness of Peter and John, and perceiv[ing] that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marvelled [and] they realized that they had been with Jesus” [Acts 4: 5-13]. But when the sons of Sceva, a Jewish priest at Ephesus, tried to cast out an evil spirit from a man in the name of Jesus, the demon in him said, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” The man attacked them violently and they fled naked and wounded [Acts 19: 11-16]! God’s purpose determines what the Holy Spirit manifests.

c) *Your transformation should show in your actions, not mere words!*

By their fruits, people are known. The disciples were said to be in one accord in one place [Acts 2: 1] and “all who believed were together, and had all things in common.” They continued daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house. They ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart. They praised God and found favour with all the people [vv. 44-47]. Those are the marks of a vital church. Those are a clear manifestation of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and those who live in the Spirit should also walk in the Spirit [Gal. 5: 21-25].

The main lesson we learn from the foregoing, therefore, is that only the Holy Spirit can transform church leaders and their flocks to give up earthly vanities in their relationships with God and the world.

4. Conclusion: Be Spirit-led!

No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12: 3]. Other faiths do not believe in the Holy Spirit. That is why they do not accept Jesus as the Son of God or their Lord and Saviour. However, you do believe. Therefore, you are Spirit-led! But, wait a minute. To be Spirit-led, you must not merely mime buzz-words; you must sincerely practise a life of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can truly transform!