

The Great Ends of the Church

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday after Christmas, January 8, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today we ordain and install new elders and deacons. The ordination and installation of church officers has taken place in this church for 235 years. From my reading of the historical evidence the first elders were ordained for this church in 1754. Presbyterians have actually worshipped on or near this site for over 250 years but only a church which has been officially organized by the authority of Presbytery can choose and ordain elders and deacons. So you who are being ordained and installed today continue in a long and honored tradition.

The Scripture lessons assigned for this morning weren't chosen with the ordination and installation of church officers in mind. They were chosen because this is the day that the church remembers the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus wasn't baptized as an infant. The sacrament of Christian Baptism hadn't been instituted yet. Ordinarily Jews weren't baptized at all. Only Gentiles who became Jews were baptized usually with their children. But John called Jews as well as Gentiles to repent and be baptised as though he considered Jews to be no better than Gentiles. Jesus responded to John's call. He didn't need to be baptized because he had no sin. But in baptism Jesus consciously identified with sinful people. His decision to be baptized was his first step on the way to the cross where he took upon himself the sins of the world so that we might be acquitted and forgiven.

There's something about the Baptism of Jesus which is very much like an ordination and installation. His baptism marked the official beginning of his ministry just as your installation and ordination marks the

beginning of your ministry as an elder or deacon. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism. When we ordain and install elders and deacons I will pray that the Holy Spirit would fill them. The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus to fulfil God's purpose through him. The same Spirit will empower us to fulfill God's purpose.

Jesus, like each of you elders and deacons was fully human, every bit as human as you are. Even though Jesus was the unique Son of God he was fully human. As a human being Jesus couldn't fulfil his ministry apart from the filling of the Holy Spirit and neither can we. Let me put it this way. If Jesus hadn't been anointed by the Holy Spirit at his Baptism he would have failed when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. He would have refused the cup of suffering offered to him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He would have avoided the cross. As a human being, he just wouldn't have been able to do what had to be done without the empowerment of the Spirit of God.

Many Christians try to fulfil God's purpose for their lives without the filling of the Holy Spirit. Elders and deacons and Ministers of the Word often attempt to carry on the work of the church in the power of the flesh, rather than in the Spirit of Christ. As a result a church can become self-centered and, as individuals, we don't have the power to resist temptation. We end up living defeated lives, bound up in our own concerns. We fail to accomplish all that God wants to accomplish through us.

So often we're like the disciples in the book of Acts. We've received the word of God. We believe the Gospel. We confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior but it doesn't seem to make much difference in our lives. Just as Jesus needed the Holy Spirit to anoint him, and just as those Samaritan believers needed the empowerment of the Spirit, so do we.

The Holy Spirit is none other than the Spirit of Jesus. God wants to fill us with the Spirit of Jesus. Think if the worlds leaders were filled with the Spirit of Jesus. Think if all our elected officials and all our doctors and nurses and lawyers and business men and women and factory workers and farmers were filled with the Spirit of Jesus. Think if every Minister, every Elder and every Deacon were filled with the Spirit of Jesus. If you were filled with the Spirit of Jesus how would you face conflict? How would you face temptation? How would you face injustice and oppression? How would we handle prosperity or face defeat and loss? With what eyes would we look upon those who've never believed the Gospel? If all us were filled with the Spirit of Jesus think of how that would affect the ministry of this church, the goals of this church, the mission giving of the church, as well as the local ministries. If all of us were filled with the Spirit of Jesus how would it affect the way we look at homeless people, or single people.

Jesus was constantly reaching out to the unloved, to the diseased, to the rejects. I've often wondered what it was about Jesus that attracted so many unreligious people to him. Ordinarily non-churched people don't feel comfortable with religious people. They don't share the same interests. They don't talk the same language. But non-churched people flocked to Jesus. Strange! They felt accepted by Him. They felt loved by Him. They felt like He really enjoyed their company. In His presence they felt empowered to change their lives. When they were with Jesus they had this wonderful certainty that their lives had a purpose and meaning. They felt like they could turn the world upside down.

The book of Acts tells us the story of how these men and women actually began to turn the world upside down. We can see the Spirit of

Jesus working through ordinary men and women to build the church and create a whole new world. The church grew through the power of the Spirit from Jerusalem to Samaria to Europe and finally to the ends of the earth. This happened because ordinary men and women like you and me were filled with the Spirit of Jesus. The story is one of action, not so much by the apostles as by the Holy Spirit: teaching, reminding, guiding, showing, convicting, convincing, producing a new people for a new age.

Probably all of us have been baptised with water. That water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. But it's not just an empty symbol. It's God's unwavering promise to be our Father. By the work of the Holy Spirit God marks as adopted children those who are baptized, enabling us to accept forgiveness through repentance, to affirm our new identity as members of Christ's body, and to show ourselves to be the Lord's in ministry to others.

As the elders and deacons come forward to be ordained and installed pray for them. Pray that when they kneel for the laying on of hands that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, will fill and control and empower them to carry out the mission of this church in the Spirit of Jesus. Pray for all the elders and deacons. Pray as well for yourselves. Claim the promises that God has made to you in your baptism and receive the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Let us pray: Almighty God, who anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit and declared him to be your Son: send your Holy Spirit upon us who have been baptized in his name, that we may surrender our lives to your service and rejoice to be called the sons and daughters of God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.