

22. April 2024

The guidance of the Holy Spirit

Acts 11:1-18

The apostles and the brothers in Judaea heard that gentiles too had accepted the word of God, and when Peter came up to Jerusalem the circumcised believers protested to him and said, 'So you have been visiting the uncircumcised and eating with them!' Peter in reply gave them the details point by point. 'One day, when I was in the town of Jaffa,' he began, 'I fell into a trance as I was praying and had a vision of something like a big sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners. This sheet came right down beside me. I looked carefully into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of heaven. Then I heard a voice that said to me, "Now, Peter, kill and eat!" But I answered, "Certainly not, Lord; nothing profane or unclean has ever crossed my lips." And a second time the voice spoke from heaven, "What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane." This was repeated three times, before the whole of it was drawn up to heaven again. 'Just at that moment, three men stopped outside the house where we were staying; they had been sent from Caesarea to fetch me, and the Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going back with them. The six brothers here came with me as well, and we entered the man's house. He told us he had seen an angel standing in his house who said, "Send to Jaffa and fetch Simon known as Peter; he has a message for you that will save you and your entire household." 'I had scarcely begun to speak when the Holy Spirit came down on them in the same way as it came on us at the beginning, and I remembered that the Lord had said, "John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit." I realised then that God was giving them the identical gift he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; and who was I to stand in God's way?' This account satisfied them, and they gave glory to God, saying, 'God has clearly granted to the gentiles too the repentance that leads to life.'

As we can see, the apostles had a very trusting relationship with the Holy Spirit. If this had not been the case, Peter could not have claimed without any doubt that the Spirit Himself had told him, to go with those men sent to him from Caesarea. To enter the house of the uncircumcised was very unusual for the Jews of that time, and it was precisely this that was reproached by those Jews who had become Christians.

It took some time for the young Church, born in Jerusalem, to better understand the extent of its mission. The wall separating the Jews from the Gentiles had been broken down by the Lord Himself, through His death (cf. Eph 2:14-16), and He poured out on the Gentiles the same Holy Spirit.

This was an incredible event for the Jews! We see that Peter had to be instructed three times by the Lord to understand that the distinction between pure and impure, as he was accustomed to apply it, was no longer valid, because God Himself had purified everything. The Gentiles had also been invited to the Lord's Table and were granted the conversion that leads to life.

How important it is to listen to the Holy Spirit! We see that He was the impulse for the apostles. In His light we can recognise what God wants to communicate to us.

We too are invited to enter into an intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit, so that our faith and the works that flow from it may grow stronger and stronger, so that day by day we may listen to Him better and allow ourselves to be moved by Him.

But how can we come to understand Him better?

Usually the Holy Spirit does not shout or make a fuss, but rather communicates Himself to us as a supernatural light in which we can understand. He always awakens in us a greater love and calls us to live our faith responsibly. He does not leave doubts or uncertainty in our souls, but strengthens us with His presence and gives us a certain security in His actions, but without giving way to that pride which makes us feel superior to others. The Holy Spirit always warns us when we are about to take a wrong step and, when we have learned to listen to Him, His guidance will become very subtle. For this, our heart needs to be attentive and purified of any kind of attachment.

We can best understand the guidance of the Holy Spirit by comparing it to a dialogue with a person, to whom we want to say something: perhaps to remark a mistake or to give him a hint about something he should improve. Normally, this should not be done abruptly; rather, the way we say things to a person should be in respect for his dignity and his freedom. It is the Holy Spirit Himself who teaches us the appropriate way. But, at the same time, love for that person demands that we do not shy away from telling

him or her, even if we fear that he or she might react unwillingly. Well, perhaps we can now imagine that the Holy Spirit proceeds in a similar way when He wants to convey something to us.

The decisive point is whether the other person listens: is he ready to accept what is being said, or is he so absorbed in his feelings, emotions, thoughts or convictions that it is impossible to reach him? Perhaps he immediately reacts by contradicting us, justifying himself, or even by counter-attacking?

This example is only meant to show us what happens when the Holy Spirit wants to speak to us, but encounters obstacles that come from our attachment to ourselves. When this is the case, the Holy Spirit will first have to clear the way, with our cooperation, so that we can hear and understand His voice, so that He can penetrate us.

Let us look at Peter. Three times the Lord urged him to yield to his previous view of the pure and the impure, and to open himself to the new reality that God was showing him through the vision. Then the Holy Spirit, descending on those in Cornelius' house, manifested to him what God was working and brought to his remembrance those words of the Lord: *"John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 1:5).

Now, in the light of the Holy Spirit, Peter comes to the right conclusion, and so do those who were listening to his account, so that they exclaim, *"God has clearly granted to the gentiles too the repentance that leads to life!"*