

*Come Holy Spirit, hover over us as we open ourselves to your inspiration, Amen.*

I guess this is the time of year when a lot of us look backwards over last year as well as forwards over what might happen in the coming year. Just a few weeks ago on Gaudete Sunday we heard from John's Gospel about the ministry of John the Baptist and today we heard from Mark's Gospel a bit more about his ministry of baptising with water and preparing the way for the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit. In some way each of our readings this morning tell us something of the work of the Spirit of God in creation , in the life of Jesus and in the lives of the early disciples. The question that I found myself asking was where can we see that same Spirit at work in the life of our church and community and in me?

Our first reading today takes us back to when time began. Genesis starts with “In the beginning”. When the Spirit came as a wind from God over the face of the waters and the earth that was formless and void and God filled it with light. God's first creative act was to give the world light, something that sustains life and established the pattern of day and night.

In a matter of weeks we have witnessed along with the shepherds the Birth of Jesus when the light of the world came and dwelt among us, and the Epiphany of the 3 wise men who as outsiders had sought out the child born King of the Jews.

This year our Gospel readings are taken from Mark which is believed to be the oldest of the Synoptic Gospels. Mark seems to focus more on what Jesus did than on what he said. Mark like John does not contain the Nativity narrative but Mark writes in these opening words that here is “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God”. Elsewhere the same word is translated as the Gospel message so we could say it's the Good News about Jesus but it may also mean the good news preached by Jesus.

Mark seems to cast John the Baptist as some sort of Elijah figure who was expected to come before the final day of the Lord and the wilderness location of his baptising ministry was a place where many Jews expected deliverance to appear. Mark makes it clear that the one he is announcing is Jesus of Nazareth.

The analogy of untying sandals is used once again to highlight the difference between himself and his ministry and that of Jesus and his ministry which is just about to start. Yet still Jesus comes to him for Baptism. We are not told why Jesus came but for Mark the significance of the event is that this is the moment when Jesus' identity is given the seal of divine approval. God himself declares Jesus to be his Son. The addition of the words “the beloved” hark back to the story of Abraham and Isaac linking perhaps to the sacrificial nature of his life and ministry.

The heavens being torn apart when God spoke is what theologians call a Theophany and the coming of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove which is celebrated in our church window by the baptistery may allude back to the creation story where some Jewish scholars interpret the words there as hovering like a dove over the waters, so this may be indicating a new creation.

The idea that this was just the beginning of the Good News allows us to move beyond the immediacy of Jesus' ministry to the mission of the early church. In the book of Acts we can find Paul in Ephesus where he finds a group of disciples of John the Baptist who haven't heard about the Holy Spirit. This is a similar story to Peter's experience of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit in Samaria. Both passages give us the same sequence of Christian initiation.

The ruins of the Church of St John the Apostle are on the hill above Ephesus near modern day Selcuk. When Isobel and I were there in 2015, we discovered the original walk in baptistery with 3 steps in and 3 steps out. Our Turkish Guide was fascinated to discover that this simple design was probably a visual aid to Christian Baptism: for God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light and following Jesus Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life

We are asked 3 questions each represented by the steps going down:

Do we reject evil and all rebellion against God?

Do we renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

Do we repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbours?

But for Christians it doesn't stop there because there are 3 steps coming up

Do we turn to Christ as Saviour?

Do we submit to Christ as Lord?

Do we come to Christ the way, the truth and the life?

When Paul baptises the disciples of John the Baptist in the name of Jesus and lays his hands on them, they receive the Holy Spirit and are given the same Spiritual Gifts that the disciples had experienced at Pentecost and their lives were changed. We are not told what the twelve in Ephesus went on to do but we do know that the Good News went on to spread throughout Asia Minor.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that only God can make new beginnings for people. For this to happen we have to make a conscious decision to allow the Holy Spirit to change us. For 30 years Jesus of Nazareth had lived his life as a Carpenter but his baptism revealed that he was Jesus the beloved Son of God and he was lead out into the wilderness get ready for his ministry. Through baptism we are recognised as beloved children of God. Some of us may have been baptised as children and later made our own declaration of faith at Confirmation. For some of us that may have been a long time ago but let us never forget that God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and has given us a place with the saints of light. We have received the light of Christ and we need to walk in this light all the days of our lives.

When Michael used that bundle of LED lights last week it made me realise that we shine more light when we are gathered together. Unfortunately the current situation means that we can't meet in person but we can gather on line to make sure our lights don't get to dim. The Holy Spirit can fill us anew providing we are willing to empty out our old selves. Let's renew our decision to share this life changing message through what we say and do.

Amen. [1172]