24/1/21 Stay Alert to the Spirit Session 1 ‘Setting the Scene’ A Sermon by Rev Steve Lees (Mark 1:1-12; Isaiah 57:14-21 & Psalm 137:1-6)

Stay Alert to the Spirit (SATS) is a 7-week programme to help us seek God’s path in troubled times. The resources have been produced by Jesus Shaped People (JSP), an organisation who have helped lots of churches to follow Jesus more closely. JSP identify the five priorities of Jesus as these: People; Teaching; Team Building; Prayer; & Prophetic Challenge. We’ll use these priorities to help us listen afresh to what the Spirit is saying to the Church in this time of challenge, pain, loss and change; these strange days of Covid -19. Today we set the scene for the coming weeks of listening and discovery.

***‘The time has come.’*** (Mark 1:15) In Greek, there are two words for time. *Chronos* – ‘what time is it?’ and *Kairos* – ‘the time has come’. Challenging times (like a global pandemic) are times to listen to the Spirit of God. Could this be a *Kairos* moment for the Holy Spirit to re-shape us for all that Jesus wants to bring about in our world today? Revelation 2:7 says; *‘Those who have an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’* This was written at a time of great persecution of Jews and Christians; it was also a period when Jesus gave a message to the ‘angel’ of each church, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and encouraging them to move forward. Lots of people, Christian and non-Christians, have been talking about ways of moving forward. Our politicians talk about ‘light at the end of the tunnel’, about the vaccine being our ‘way out’ of the crisis. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought issues of racial justice to the fore and Extinction Rebellion and others highlight the environmental crisis. Along with other matters many are asking, how can we build back better? As much as any other time, the Church needs to listen to God for his leading and realise that in times of crisis God is preparing the way for spiritual resurgence in the church and in the world. How do we listen to God? Prayer is key, and we need to practice the habit of being still and like Samuel say *‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’* (1 Sam 3:10) I was challenged the other day by my neighbour telling me she meets on ‘zoom’ everyday (apart from Sunday) for half an hour’s prayer with friends to pray for the city of Bradford. Pray and listen…

**Prophecy leads to Expectation, Repentance & Response** Some of you are thinking; we had that passage from Mark, 2 weeks ago! Yes, we did but it’s such a key event that it’s worth looking at again. Today we concentrate on the role of John the Baptist. John’s dad was a priest in Jerusalem, but John is called to be a prophet in the desert. This role is essential but highly vulnerable and often unwelcome! John’s *prophetic challenge* and call for people to be baptised leads to great *expectation*. John believes this is a ‘Kairos moment’; Isaiah’s words from long ago are being fulfilled and people are invited to believe that God is doing new things! To be ready for God’s action, John calls people to *repentance*. I wonder what you understand by the word repentance? It probably makes you feel guilty and think about what personal sin you need to confess to God. And you’d be right, it is about that BUT primarily it’s about a change; about making a new beginning. Literally it means to turn round and ‘embrace a new direction’. Lots of people *responded* to John’s call; they were hungry for change and willing to embrace a new direction.

So, what does all this mean for us in 2021? I wonder when was the last time you were aware of a *prophetic challenge*? Perhaps the Church has got a bit out of balance, we rightly highlight the need for preaching & teaching but we’re a bit sceptical, to put it mildly about prophecy being relevant today. It’s good to test things and some speech labelled prophecy can frankly seem bizarre BUT we are in danger of stifling prophetic imaginations. Just this week, a neighbour of mine told me about a dream she’d had…I won’t go into detail here, but it was such an encouraging thing to hear, I took it as an encouragement (and prod!) from God. Of course, she could have kept it to herself but she took the risk of sounding ridiculous…I’m glad she did! Imagine if John Wesley had kept quiet about what he felt God was challenging him about…keeping quiet could have stifled a revival of Christian faith throughout this country and beyond.

As we take care to listen out for words of prophecy (of God speaking) it will lead to *expectation*. Is this a ‘Kairos moment’ and what does the coming change look like? Maybe we’ve been more aware of acts of kindness and increased neighbourliness during the pandemic…how could we build back better?

Will expectation lead to *repentance*; are we ready to ‘embrace a new direction’? This might involve letting some things go, and taking new things up. Will we share Jesus’ heart for the poor and challenge the assumption that economic growth is the only answer to human problems; to challenge the disparity between rich and poor & the injustice between different races? We’ll try and explore these things in the next few weeks. Repentance leads to *response.* My hope is that over these 7 weeks we will use ‘Stay Alert to the Spirit’ as a tool and work out what God is saying and find common response with all kinds of people who feel a spiritual hunger for change (why not invite people to join our online worship and Monday small group!).

Each week as well as a passage from Marks’ Gospel, we will use passages from Isaiah to rediscover God’s way of doing things. So, in Isaiah 57, we find the prophet talking about building a road (v14). John the Baptist uses the same picture ‘build up and prepare the road’ upon which God comes to us in Jesus. As we do that, we like those early disciples on the road to Emmaus, identify Jesus accompanying us on the journey. Isaiah reminds us that God inhabits the spirit of the lowly and the heart of the contrite (v15). Jesus who became the lowliest and least, reveals God’s nature and method; he is to be found amongst the lost and least (Matthew 25:31-46). At the same time God is appalled by corporate and individual greed and our failure to listen and respond to him; but he still longs to heal and comfort us (v18). Evil is all around but peace eludes the wicked and those who put obstacles in the road (v20-21).

Perhaps the present crisis can enable God’s purposes to reverberate in our world, and create a hunger for ways much closer to the Way of his Kingdom. If we listen carefully—to our own inner voice, and that of the people around us, we can begin to identify and respond to the voice of the Spirit…to Stay Alert to the Spirit!

*Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send your Spirit, Lord, and we shall hear your voice, and you will renew the face of the earth. Amen*

Notices: If you have not been contacted already, shortly myself, Anne Smith, Jenni Bradley or Natalie will be ringing to ask you some questions around how effectively we are looking after one another and also how we are helping one another to worship God, particularly during lockdown. Thank you in anticipation for your responses. Do be in touch with me or your pastoral carer if you or anyone you know has any need or you just want to chat.

Although the building is closed for Sunday worship, we have decided to hold funerals. I’m sad to say one of these will be for Benita Ross who died on 15th Jan after a sudden cancer diagnosis. The time and date are of her funeral are to be arranged but numbers will be strictly limited due to the current restrictions.