10/1/21 The Baptism of Christ. A Sermon for St James, Bolton by Rev Steve Lees. (Genesis 1:1-5 & Mark 1:4-11) *(thank you to Nicky Gumbel’s ‘Bible in One Year’ for lots of inspiration for this talk!)*

I love walking, it’s great exercise. Me and Jane did a fair bit of walking over the Christmas break…it was often *very* muddy! It’s good to walk and talk, and even if you’re walking on your own, you can walk and talk with God. While we enter another lockdown, I’d encourage you, if you are able, to take advantage of your daily allowable exercise by walking and talking with God…We might imagine we need to shut ourselves off in a quiet place to pray (sometimes that is the right thing to do) but the Bible speaks a great deal about people ‘walking with God’ (eg Enoch in Gen 5:24, Noah in Gen 6:9). They didn’t just kneel or stand with God but they were in communion with God as they went about their daily lives. So, walk the streets and places of our parish (or wherever you live) and be in communion with God; ask God to speak to you, and ask God to bless the people and houses that you pass.

God is all about communion. At the beginning, the Father, Son and Spirit are right there in communion at the creation*. ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth…and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters.’* (Gen 1:1-2) John’s Gospel tells us that everything was made through Jesus; *‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…Through him all things were made…’* (John 1:1-3) As the creator God longs to extend his communion with his creatures, the pinnacle of which is us…human beings made in His image. We were designed to walk in communion with God. God intends for us to walk in a particular way; ‘walk humbly with God’ (Micah 6:8). Walking with God is not always easy; sometimes we fall over, or get stuck in the mud or run in the opposite direction like Jonah! But God wants us to walk as Jesus did (1 John 2:6) and he has given us his Holy Spirit to help us do that!

St Paul encourages us to *‘keep in step with the Spirit’* (Gal 5:25). Let’s take a closer look at our gospel reading to see how we can do that better. John the Baptist is walking with God who tells him to go out in the desert to baptise people for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4) Loads of people walk out to him and get baptised in the Jordan River. I remember when me and Jane were privileged to visit the very place where they think this took place; do you know what happened? Someone walked up to Gordon Dey (who was our group leader) and asked if he could be baptised…yes of course said Gordon and dunked him in the water! The strange thing about the gospel account is that Jesus walks up to John and asks to be baptised…why would he do that? He didn’t need any sins forgiven, and John isn’t keen to do it, trying to put Jesus off (see Matthew 3:14). We also read in Matthew that Jesus gives the reason for his baptism; *‘to fulfil all righteousness’* (v15). Jesus, God incarnate, literally comes down to our level in that muddy river (yes, it is muddy!) and identifies with our brokenness and mess, it’s the start of his walk that will lead him to the cross to take upon himself our sin, mine and yours…to forgive us and put us right with God. So, walk humbly with God, be humble enough to admit your sin and ask God for forgiveness. We can’t put things right on our own, we need Jesus and his amazing grace!

What does the baptism of Jesus mean for us? As I said Jesus didn’t need to be baptised for ‘repentance’ and he was already full of the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism was symbolic but we read that Jesus *‘will baptise you with the Holy Spirit’* (Mark 1:8). This prophecy is dramatically affirmed when the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus as he is baptised. (v10). This shows the Jesus is the one John has been talking about and now wants to pour this same Holy Spirit on you and me! As we receive the Spirit we are enabled to walk ‘in step with the Spirit’.

There are 5 clues in this passage to help us know what that means. 1) Get cleansed. Matthew’s version adds a word: ‘He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and *fire*.’ (Matt 3:11) Water cleans but in a particular way so does fire; the Holy Spirit bringing power and purity to our lives. Our experience of lockdown may lead us to see that God wants to burn away things that are not helpful in our lives. We rely on all sorts of things rather than God (money, possessions, influence etc). These things are not bad in themselves BUT they can become bad if they take God’s place in our lives. Covid-19 seems to have robbed us of many securities…maybe we should now find our security in God, the only one who can really give it.

2) Be filled with peace. ‘…*the Spirit descend(ed) like a dove’* (v10); the symbol of peace. Today, don’t strive, just ask Jesus to give you his peace, the fruit of his Spirit (Gal 5: 22).

3) Be assured of your adoption. *‘And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son’.* (v11) Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way. However, the Spirit assures us that though Jesus we too are adopted into God’s family as his sons and daughters. (Romans 8:15-16) May the words of the song be embodied in you; ‘I’m no longer a slave to fear, I am a child of God’.

4) Know that you are loved by God. In verse 11, Jesus’ identity is affirmed as one who is loved. What God says about Jesus, he says about you*; ‘Fear not for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name…you are precious…and I love you.’* (Isa 43:1-5)

5) Feel his pleasure. *‘…with you I am well pleased’*. For many of us this is a hard thing to grasp…God pleased with me? Well yes, he made you, and *‘you are fearfully and wonderfully made’* (Ps 139:14). He didn’t make a mistake when he made you…he’s pleased with what he has made. He makes each of us for a purpose. I wonder when you feel God’s pleasure? Eric Lydell, whose story is told in the film ‘Chariots of Fire’ said; ‘When I run, I feel God’s pleasure.’ God had given him that particular gift, & when he used it, he sensed God’s delight. Maybe God’s looking at you today thinking I love it when *n* bakes a cake…when *n* sings to me, when *n* fixes his neighbour’s fence (whatever it is God’s made you good at!).

*Let’s pray: Father God please fill me with that same Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism. Cleanse me, give me peace, give me assurance that I am your child and you love me. May I feel your pleasure and walk in step with you today. Amen*

**Notices:** NB from 5th Jan because of the national lockdown, PCC have decided that **the church building will be closed** for public worship for the time being. We will continue to provide an online service of worship each week on our website from 10.30am on Sundays. If you know someone who would like a paper copy of the week’s sermon ***or is in any need*** please get in touch.

REMEMBER, we also ‘meet’ online for Morning Prayer on facebook on Mondays and Fridays at 8.45am starting again on 11th Jan. We ‘meet’ to think how to apply the Bible to our lives each Monday evening at 7.30pm on Zoom. We ‘meet’ to pray for ourselves, our parish and world each Wednesday at 7.30pm on Zoom. (NB you can phone in if you are not online…ask Steve for details!)

From 24th Jan we begin a series of sermons, and Monday Bible studies on the theme *‘Stay alert to the Spirit’*. Particularly thinking about how God may be speaking to us in times of crisis such as the current pandemic.