

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 17th December, 2017

Welcome to Worship – 3rd Sunday in Advent

10.30am Nine Lessons & Carols led by Ken Hudson

2.30pm Blue Christmas Service – “A Time to Remember”
with Rev Andrew Robinson

6.00pm Town Close with Stokesley Methodist Choir

A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

Living God, as we light these three candles in the name of Jesus, the light of the world: make straight our paths, enlighten our hearts and our minds, bless us on our Advent journey; and may your kingdom come.

As we continue on our Advent journey – in the strength of hope, celebrating the glimpses of glory in our midst, and preparing for the glories to come, following that strange voice crying in the wilderness, and acknowledging our own voice crying in our hearts; So, Lord of our journeying, Lord of our crying, meet us in Bethlehem, that we may worship you, individually, as a community, as a church, as the world you came to save.

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 61 v1-4, 8-11 The Year of the Lord’s Favour

“The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners ...”

Psalm 126

“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.”

1 Thessalonians 5 v16-24 Final Instructions

“May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

John 1 v6-8, 19-28 The Word Becomes Flesh/John the Baptist Denies Being the Christ

“He came as a witness ... he himself was not the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”

What Do You say About Yourself?

When someone important is visiting a town, you will see posters going up, barriers along the roadside, extra police cars on patrol. In the same way, when a big pop star is to perform, there will often be a ‘warm-up act’ who performs songs to get the audience in the mood before the star appears. When Jesus was born, angels were sent to various people to prepare them, but ‘the general public’ really didn’t notice his arrival. It was later on, when he was about to start teaching and work miracles, that Jesus came into the forefront of public attention. His warm-up act was John, who announced that someone special was about to come on the scene.

But starting with the Old Testament reading, Isaiah, speaking as one returning home from exile, says, ‘The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me ... he has anointed me to preach good news ... to

proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' and so on. These are, of course, the words read out by Jesus in the synagogue at the beginning of his public ministry (Luke 4.16ff.). For Christians, when Jesus speaks these words he is taking on the mantle of God's anointed one – he is showing that the time of exile from God is over. God's kingdom is breaking in.

However, in the Old Testament context, the words are how Isaiah indicates that exile is over – and in that context, they are striking. The Lord's favour is marked by love for the outsider and for the marginalised. Good news is proclaimed to the oppressed, the captive and the broken-hearted. Those in prisons – whether of imagination, the heart or physical bondage – will be set free. And, Isaiah adds, 'they will rebuild up the ancient ruins' (v4). At face value, this refers to the work of rebuilding that God's people must do as they return home from exile in Babylon. But it also represents an ongoing challenge to be faithful to God's way of love and reconciliation. It is an ever-present challenge to remember that God's grace is not simply about feeling good or uplifted, nor simply saying that 'we're saved'. It is a grace with edge – it calls to the exile within us to return and be faithful, but also to stand with those who are looking for good news and longing to be set free from the time of trial.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing any of us is to 'know' ourselves. It is so difficult for us to see ourselves as we truly are. As we come to know God better, we slowly begin to see ourselves more clearly. This is the wellspring of true humility. For humility is not about putting yourself down, but seeing yourself more honestly as you are.

The experience of John the Baptizer in this week's reading from John's Gospel is a salutary reminder of this. He is the first witness to Jesus, to the one who is the very presence of God. But the

impressive thing about John is his clarity about who he is not. He is, in the deepest sense of the word, 'humble'. True humility is knowing yourself, and part of that is knowing who you are not. John is bombarded with questions: 'Are you Elijah?' 'Are you the prophet?' – and so on. He is clearly a remarkable man, because he attracts a lot of attention from a crowd hungry for holiness and blessing. But he is also clear himself that his job is to prepare the way for Jesus, not to build up himself.

So, John points to Jesus, the very Word or truth of God now in human form. Jesus is the one who is truly himself, who is truly humble. He is the light to whom John the Baptizer testifies (v7-8) – the 'light of the world' who shows up the world in its true light, illuminating all its shadows and its darkness, and revealing all its wonder. But Jesus does not come merely to show us our limitations; he comes to invite us into a new way of living. This new way of living is about coming home from exile and being at peace with our truest selves.

In both the Old and New Testament readings, we encounter a God calling us to be our deepest selves in his community. If the Gospel offers an impressive picture, through John the Baptizer, of humility as self-knowledge, Isaiah suggests that our deepest selves mean we are called to be open to the edge: we are humble when we are open to the outsider.

A Sending Out Prayer

May your heart be at peace, and your mind be at rest.

May you be confident in who you are, and share God's gifts of light, hope and grace with those you meet and those you pray for.

Amen.