

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 11th March, 2018

Welcome to Worship

10.30am Morning Worship led by Rev Andrew Robinson
6.00pm Town Close with Rev Richard Bradshaw

A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

We give thanks to you, O Lord, whose goodness extends to the ends of the earth, whose love endures till the end of time.

We give praise to you, O God, who gathers us from the four corners of the world, from the north and from the south, from the east and from the west.

Let all people come together to worship you.

We come to give you thanks, O Lord.

Your goodness extends to us.

Your love touches our lives.

We come to give you our praise, O God.

You gather us together to worship, from our past and what we have been, from our present and what we can become.

Let us come to you, and worship.

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Numbers 21 v4-9 The Bronze Snake

"We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you, Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people."

Psalm 107 v1-3, 17-22

"Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress ... Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love."

Ephesians 2 v1-10 Made Alive in Christ

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast."

John 3 v14-21 Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

No Turning Back

This week we hear how Jesus' crucifixion is compared to the serpent Moses lifted up before the people. God gives his Son because he wants to save the world he loves. And through him light has come into the world.

So as you read on, we shall explore the concept of living in the dark and then accepting God's gift to live in the light.

In the passage from Numbers we see that the way to liberation is hard and the people of Israel are getting impatient. They are complaining – again! Now they are describing the manna, God's provision, as miserable food and they are being attacked by snakes. God's response is judgement followed by the provision of

a way of redemption. It is worth noting that God specifies that Moses should make a poisonous serpent – that is, the way of redemption mirrors the cause of suffering. There is something in this story about the seriousness of following God. But there is also something about grace in the midst of judgement (a theme that is taken up in Psalm 107). And these two things are linked by prayer: Moses prays (because the people ask him to) and God responds graciously.

In John's Gospel, at the end of the richly humorous and deeply theological story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, we are plunged back into Numbers and the incident of the serpents. In just the same way that Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so that those who looked in its direction would be healed, so Jesus will be lifted up and those who look to him will enter his kingdom. In the same way that people bitten by snakes in Numbers would die unless they looked towards Moses' serpent, so those who do not believe in Jesus will continue in death. This lifting up is clearly a reference to the cross, though John does not spell that out at this point in his story.

Starkly, John says that judgement has already begun because the light has come into the world, but people refuse to welcome it, choosing instead to continue living in the dark where they can hide their evil deeds.

At the end of the section, John says that the life we receive in Jesus is about doing what is right, suggesting that faith - believing in Jesus - leads to actions that show we have moved from the dark to the light.

John uses the term 'eternal life' where the Synoptic Gospels use the phrase 'the kingdom of God/heaven'. So, the focus of what he is saying here is not on what happens to people when they die, but on how they live here and now, after they have put their trust

in Jesus. We live as people who are not ashamed of our actions because they are done in God' name – they are done as an expression of our faith in him.

The passage from Ephesians is the climax of the opening section of the Paul's letter. Paul is talking about what the grace of God does for each individual, lost and wandering in the darkness of death and sin: it brings us alive. We cannot resuscitate ourselves. We cannot turn over a new leaf and make it all better. We are dead, says Paul, and so we need to be raised. And only God can do that. And because he is rich in mercy that is precisely what he does. His mercy means that we have been raised with Jesus. This act of grace leads to lives of fruitful service. We are created in Christ to do good in the world; it is to be our way of life, a way God has planned for us, to live fruitfully in the world that he is redeeming and reclaiming from death.

In each reading there is a strong focus on grace. In Numbers, as a result of Moses' prayer, God acts to rescue a complaining people. In Ephesians, it is grace that raises us to new life when we put our faith in Jesus. And in John 3, the love of God in sending Jesus into the dark world results in his grace working to bring us out of the dark into the light, out of death into eternal life. In each there is also an emphasis on our action – people have to look to the serpent, we have to put our faith in Jesus. But grace comes first – God acts to save, and looks for a response from us.

Sending Out Prayer

God so loved the world that he sent his only Son.

Christ so loved the world that he sent the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit so loves the world that she sends us out in love, to love and to be loved – there is no greater calling.

Amen.