

# Stokesley Methodist Church



**Sunday 10th January 2021**



## **A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources**

This the day that the Lord has made. **Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

We are the family of God. **And are called by God's name.**

We are heirs of Christ's kingdom. **And born of the Spirit.**

Let us, therefore, come together, wherever we are, in thanksgiving.

Lord God, giver of light and life, by your word you bring everything into being – the far-flung galaxies and the tiniest atomic particle.

You have given us a world to enjoy and to care for.

Give us compassion in the use of its resources, wisdom in our stewardship of your gifts, and reverence for all that you have made – for Jesus' sake.

Come, let us honour the powerful glory of our Creator God.

Let us worship God's majesty in the splendour of holiness.

**Amen**

## **Lectionary Readings:**

**Genesis 1 v1-5** (p3) The Beginning

**Psalm 29** (p558) Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness

**Acts 19 v1-7** (p1115) Paul in Ephesus

**Mark 1 v4-11** (p1002) John the Baptist Prepares the Way

## *The Whole World Changed*

This week our focus is on the opportunity for a new beginning that comes with Jesus.

The passage from Mark's Gospel is the first appearance of Jesus as an adult and comes at the beginning of his ministry. His baptism is a new beginning and a transformation. John the baptizer says that he is not worthy to untie Jesus' shoes. He recognises that Jesus will be able to do much greater things by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This reading is given alongside the account of the beginning of everything from the opening chapter of Genesis, and a story about the Holy Spirit and new beginnings from Acts. Our new beginnings come through the forgiveness God offers, which is not just the once in a lifetime event of our baptism, but all the forward-looking opportunities that God offers us each and every day.

At the very beginning of the story of God's outpouring of life, in Genesis, we find this powerful evocation of the dawn of everything, with its description of emptiness and darkness suddenly transformed by the word of God. It is a thrilling moment, as light erupts from the chaos and the life of creation takes off.

Integral to this process is the 'wind from God'. Scholars offer a range of possibilities in translating this phrase, including: 'storm from God'; 'breath of God'; 'spirit of God'. All these options enrich our understanding of the dynamic flow of God's life, kindling creation. Yet, in this moment of new life, there is also separation from God. Creation, summed up so far only in the light, is something that God can look at – there is a critical distance between creation and creator. God evaluates the light and finds it good, but the gap remains, and creation

will remain separate until God tears the barrier down and comes to live the life of humanity in Jesus.

Each pair of verses in Psalm 29 takes the picture of a storm and uses it as a metaphor for God's stunning power. Thunder, lightning, and wind that sends trees crashing to the ground – all these are signs of the breath-taking might of God. Yet the series of images ends with a picture of God in stillness, sitting enthroned above the flood, the throne perhaps reflected in tranquil water in the calm after the storm. The prayer that closes the psalm asks both for strength and for peace, God's attributes reflected in the life of God's people. We might very well feel like we've been riding the storm over the past months, but how reassuring it is to know that God will give us both strength to weather the storm & peace of mind that all will be well.

In Acts 19 Luke has just introduced the evangelist Apollos, who worked with the church in Corinth (that Paul had founded – see 1 Corinthians 1 v12; 3 v6). As an evangelist, Apollos had many strengths – accuracy, burning enthusiasm (Acts 18 v25) – but also one limitation. He was not familiar with the baptism of the Spirit, and so these Ephesian disciples knew only John's baptism of repentance.

Paul offered the Ephesians completion of what Apollos had begun. He baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus, recalling his words to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12 v3) in which he explains that it is only the gift of the Spirit that enables people to say, 'Jesus is Lord'. Baptism was followed immediately by evidence of their new life through gifts of the Spirit. These give shape to the disciples' new relationship with God through the intimacy of speaking in tongues and the public proclamation of prophecy. Their baptism enables them to speak to God and to their community in new ways.

Mark announces his Gospel as 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (v1). He sets the scene for transformation by telling the story of John the Baptist, who fulfils Isaiah's prophecy and makes the preparations. These are impressive in themselves. Mark describes crowds of people thronging from all directions to find John in

the desert and seek his baptism. But this is only the prologue. John's ministry reaches its climax with the announcement of the one who will baptize with water and the Holy Spirit – and then Jesus appears.

The whole passage centres on new beginnings. The first sentence of the Gospel spells out the way in which the world is entirely changed, now that Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, is present. Mark goes on to describe the ways in which this new life is made real. People are offered the opportunity for a fresh start. The Greek word usually translated 'repentance' (v4) carries the sense of 'a change of mind' or 'a change of heart'. It relates far more to the promise of a new future than to mulling over the sins of the past. But this is only stage one of the new life into which God invites us.

The baptism of Jesus is also a moment of new beginning. Though there is nothing for Jesus to repent of, this is a new stage in his life too, as he moves away from the hidden years in Nazareth and begins his active ministry. At his baptism, God does something amazing. People of Jesus' time tended to imagine a rigid, unbreakable barrier dividing earth and heaven, one that made it impossible for humanity to reach God. Now this barrier is torn apart and God's Spirit comes powering through, like a descending dove. The world is indeed changed and those who experience Jesus' baptism in the Spirit will begin to discover what that means.

### **A Sending Out Prayer**

Lord, help us to be open to your prompting  
as we seek to discover what you would have us be and do.  
Remind us again and again that you have promised to be our  
guide and companion on our journey.  
Help us to look forward with renewed commitment,  
and bless our thinking and speaking and doing.  
In your name.

**Amen.**