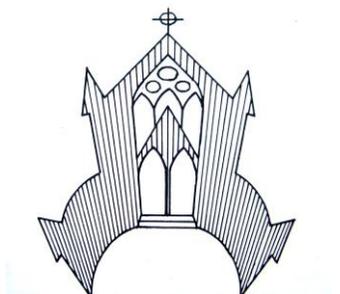


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 9th January 2022



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

Beloved of God, come, turn to Christ.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan and the Holy Spirit descended upon him, he knew he was beloved by God.

Let us know the warmth of God's love today.

God of creation, the wilderness belongs to you, and it is there you often call us to find you. From the wastelands of our lives, we seek you as did those who sought John by the Jordan.

We bow our heads for cleansing and renewal, joyfully submitting anew to the baptism of belonging to you.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 43 v1-7 (p728) Israel's Only Saviour

Psalms 29 (p558) The Lord gives strength to his people; The Lord blesses his people with peace.

Acts 8 v14-17 (p1101) Simon the Sorcerer

Luke 3 v15-17, 21-22 (p1029) John the Baptist Prepares the Way

Re-Sourced by God

This week our focus explores knowing ourselves to be loved.

This is the first time in Luke's Gospel we meet the adult Jesus, as he comes forward for baptism. John's call to repentance, meaning a change of mind, made people wonder if he was the promised Messiah. John makes it clear that the Messiah is still to come and will baptize with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit comes on him and God's voice names him as beloved – a true sign of who Jesus is.

We have been called by name and we belong to God, we too are his beloved children. This week's passage prompts us to explore what that 'belovedness' means, and what it is that re-sources and refreshes us.

In tough times, it can be really hard, exhausting and wearing, to speak with confidence and hope. The stress can be overwhelming. This week's passage from Isaiah 43 v1-7, written when the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, is therefore all the more powerful. This time of captivity would have been challenging in any number of ways. There would have been pressure, both subtle and obvious, on those exiles to assimilate to the dominant religious tradition of their captors. There would have been temptation to abandon a god who had not protected them from captivity. In short, there would have been temptations to give up on the covenant that God had established with his people long ago.

Isaiah's message to the people from God is stunning: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine' (v1). These are true words of comfort because they have been forged in fire. Isaiah writes into the facts of life: suffering, exile and loss and offers hope. Even in exile and loss, the people of God can go back to the source of hope: God's promise itself.

Voices come in many forms: loud and quiet, shouty and soft, high- and low-pitched. We live in a world of numerous competing voices, many of which love to garner selfish attention (eg through social media). Many are so self-interested that they don't care for the truth. Psalm 29 reminds us that when we feel our voices are frail or lacking power, when we think our voices don't carry far, God's voice fills the world. God invites us to rely on him; God's voice will always speak truth, hope and love.

It is so easy in an individualistic society such as ours to think either that it's all about 'me' or that only some individuals truly count. This scene from Acts (8 v14-17) teaches us otherwise. It captures how the spread of the 'good news' of Jesus and the growth of the Church is the work of community. Though the people of Samaria may have accepted the word of God, Peter and John knew there was more work to be done. These Samaritans have been baptized with water, but the full riches of God's Holy Spirit have yet to be lavished. God longs for the people to know how much they are loved. It is striking that it is Samaritans who receive this blessing, not least because the New Testament presents them as enemies of the Jews. The Holy Spirit fulfils Jesus' promises to pour out God's full blessing. It is through the work of Peter and John – as apostles of Jesus – that the people come into the full community of God.

When we picture John the Baptist, we understandably see him as something of a wild man. Some depictions dress him in animal skins and have him living off berries. As today's Gospel reading from Luke 3 notes, he proclaimed a baptism of repentance. He invites his hearers to turn away from their self-centredness and re-centre on God. Such is his authority and passion that those who hear John think he might be the Messiah, and indeed – though this happens off camera – John is perceived to be such a threat that he is put to death.

If John is impressive, he tells the crowd that he is nothing in comparison to the one who is actually the Messiah: he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire and sift the wheat from the chaff. Frankly, this sounds quite terrifying. The people may have repented – that is 'turned around' to face God – but what are they going to see? In what sense will the face before them – the face we know is Jesus – show them that they are loved?

This is a fear that faces the followers of Jesus in every age. However, we do not need to be terrified. When we dare to re-centre our lives on God, we

discover that his fire purifies. This fire will not consume us but will remove that which blocks us from the power of love. The chaff – the hard husk that protects growing wheat – will be swept away so that we can show forth the goodness at the heart of ourselves. It may be scary, but it is necessary if we are to offer our good hearts to the world.

At this time of year, we can feel low; it's dark inside and out. So, what keeps us going? Where do we draw our strength from? As Jesus made the decision to be baptized (something that was not required from him, but that he chose to do, perhaps in order to feel fully human) the Father let him know that he was his beloved Son, and with him he was well pleased. The warmth of the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus 'like a dove'.

In the film *The Lion King*, Simba felt responsible for his father's death, and his horrible Uncle Scar told him to flee the kingdom and never return. For a while he felt lost, that he didn't belong - until he met the funny characters Pumbaa the warthog and Timon the meerkat, who unconditionally loved Simba and accepted him just the way he was. They became great friends until one day he told them the truth about his father. Or what he thought was the truth. But, rather than reacting negatively, Pumbaa and Timon loved their friend and helped him go back to the kingdom and sort things out. He went on to take his rightful place as the new king and to throw his Uncle Scar out. Simba's friendship with Pumbaa and Timon had helped him recognise his own belovedness, his own worth, and it was truly life transforming. Likewise – we are beloved, God recognises our worth & our lives will be transformed with God by our side.

Sending Out Prayer:

Holy Spirit, go with us into the world.

Re-source us with your power and your presence.

Father God, help us to know your love,

and that we are your beloved sons and daughters.

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to learn from you,

and to follow your example,

that we may share belovedness

with everyone we meet.

Amen