Home Service Sheet for Sunday 15th December 2024

Call To Worship: Isaiah 12:2-6

“Behold, God is my salvation;

    I will trust, and will not be afraid;

for the Lord God is my strength and my song,

    and he has become my salvation.”

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

“Give thanks to the Lord,

    call upon his name,

make known his deeds among the peoples,

    proclaim that his name is exalted.

“Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;

    let this be made known in all the earth.

Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,

    for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Prayer

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who sent Your only Son into this world, we bring You our praise and thanks today. Lord Jesus, Light of the world, shine through our darkness, and bring us Your hope afresh. Open our hearts that we may love You with all our being and love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Open our eyes to Your light, that it may be reflected in and through us in the dark places of this world. May Your peace be at work within us, helping us to live at peace with one another, and with You. Fill our mouths with praise and shouts of joy so that we may reveal the love with which You surround us. This we pray in Jesus’ Name, amen.

Hymn:   On Jordan’s bank by Charles Coffin

<https://youtu.be/pIr21lLgFpg>

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

Announces that the Lord is nigh.

Awake and harken, for he brings

Glad tidings of the King of kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin:

Make straight the way for God within,

And let us all our hearts prepare

For Christ to come and enter there.

We hail you as our Saviour, Lord,

Our refuge and our great reward.

Without your grace we waste away

Like flowers that wither and decay.

Stretch forth your hand, our health restore,

And make us rise to fall no more.

O let your face upon us shine

And fill the world with love divine.

All praise to you, eternal Son,

Whose advent has our freedom won,

Whom with the Father we adore,

And Holy Spirit, evermore.

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Bible Reading: Luke 3:1-18

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

    make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

    and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall become straight,

    and the rough places shall become level ways,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorised to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptise you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

Reflection

During Advent we look at the Lord Jesus from several different perspectives. We begin by looking to the future when Christ will return to judge, as He proclaimed that He would. We then look back to the words of those to whom God revealed His plan hundreds of years before, in the writings of the prophets. We also hear about the first coming of Jesus through the experiences of Mary, Joseph and other witnesses. Today we hear from the one who God sent to prepare the way for His Son’s message and ministry, John the Baptist.

In his Gospel, Luke does a good job of setting the scene, both historically and theologically. We can date the beginning of John’s ministry in the desert by reference to the reign of the emperor Tiberius, and the governorship of Pilate. More importantly, though, Luke shows us the origin of John’s message, “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” (v.2) The call to repentance issued by John came not from people, but from God. It was the very message that the prophet Isaiah had announced hundreds of years before, which straightened the way in the wilderness ready for people to hear and receive the Gospel of Jesus.

Luke quickly tells us the focus of John’s ministry, writing that he came “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (v.3) We often think of baptism as a specifically Christian practice, and certainly today it is the Church that is best-known for baptising people. However, baptism, or ritual cleansing in water is rooted in Judaism, and the baptism that John practised fits into that. It is a symbolic action that represents the death of the old self, cleansed in the water, and the rising of a new self focused on God. Of course, the physical act of baptism is not what washes away someone’s sin – the only way that can happen is through the forgiveness of God in Christ.

John highlighted the fact that all people are sinners, and that the only hope of forgiveness comes from God Himself. John also emphasised the essential place of repentance to a God centred life, which Jesus would also go on to proclaim – “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;  repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15) True faith in Jesus Christ comes with repentance, or a turning away from our sin. In other words, we cannot believe in Jesus and follow Him without it changing how we live our lives, or to quote James, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:17)

It is for this very reason that John challenged some who came to be baptised, even calling them a “brood of vipers”! If you want to be right with God, and be forgiven your sin, you must change. We must not misunderstand this and think that our changed actions make us right with God, because they don’t. Instead they are the consequence of being made right with God – the fruit of repentance. Luke records some of the practical questions that people asked of John, and the wise replies that he gave them. In verse 11 John tells the people, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” This, and the other examples in the following verses point us towards a caring, sharing and fair way of life for those who seek God.

John’s ministry and message are important, but ultimately John points us away from himself towards the One who would ultimately reconcile humanity to God. Let's compare the baptism of John, with water, to the baptism that Jesus would bring. “He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire” says John (v.16). Firstly, this is not the ‘baptism’ that Pentecostal Christians talk about but is the initial indwelling of each believer with the Holy Spirit at the point of faith. We are each immersed in the Spirit when we place our faith in Jesus Christ, and by the work of the Spirit within us we are changed evermore into the likeness of Jesus. That, I believe, is the biblical baptism of the Holy Spirit – it is not something that happens later as a second blessing.

Jesus’ baptism is a baptism of fire. There are good reasons to separate this from the baptism with the Spirit that we have just mentioned. It is followed up with reference to winnowing crops and burning of weeds, and this imagery is used on several occasions in Scripture to refer to the final judgment of all people. In the final judgment those in Christ will be refined, or purified, by the fire of God, while others will be cast into hell to receive the just punishment for their unbelief. If we have faith in Jesus then we have nothing to worry about, but if not please hear Jesus’ call to faith in Him, with repentance, that you might be saved. Amen!

Pastoral Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word, the Bible, and all that You teach us about Yourself. As we have heard the message of John the Baptist, we have been reminded just how sobering a message it is. Thank You that we have not just been baptised with water, but we have been filled by Your Holy Spirit. Thank You that through Your Spirit we have become part of the body of Christ, and have been saved by grace through faith in Him. Today we pray for those that remain dead in their sin and are facing the terrible baptism of fire, that is Your righteous judgment. May each person hear the wonderful Gospel that they might believe on His name, for the forgiveness of sin and life everlasting. Look down in mercy on the fallen humanity and use us as instruments to tell out the Gospel of grace, in word and deed. In Jesus’ Name we pray, amen.

Benediction

Holy God, send us out today in Your power to proclaim the Gospel to all those we meet or speak to. Guide us in Your ways, and may the love of the Father, the obedience of the Son and the power of the Spirit be at work in us all today. In Jesus’ Name we pray, amen.