Home Service Sheet for Sunday 5th January 2025

Call To Worship: Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

    and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

    that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

    double for all her sins.

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;

    make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,

    and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

    and the rough places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

    and all flesh shall see it together,

    for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Opening Prayer

Loving God, we are drawn to Your feet in worship and adoration. We, Your creatures facing our Creator. Hearts laid bare by Your light, humbly we come asking for your grace and mercy. We come to You as people in need of Your assurance and forgiveness. We come to You as a people in need of Your healing and wholeness. We come, fully dependent upon Your love for us in Christ.

Draw us close today, O Lord, and enfold us in Your arms, we pray. Fill us afresh with Your Holy Spirit so that we might reflect Your light within this dark world. May we speak Your Word with boldness and draw others to Your feet. We ask this through Your dear Son Jesus Christ, amen.

Hymn:   Hail to the Lord’s Anointed by James Montgomery

<https://youtu.be/_mCCwBqiQdk?si=VFclOJKWIAZM0weM>

Hail to the Lord’s Anointed; great David’s greater Son!

Hail, in the time appointed, His reign on earth begun!

He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free,

To take away transgression, and rule in equity.

Anointed One, and Saviour! He comes to those in need;

And mercy, peace and favour descend their souls to feed;

He gives them songs for sighing, their darkness turns to light,

Whose souls, condemned and dying, were precious in His sight.

Kings shall fall down before Him, and gold and incense bring;

All nations shall adore Him, His praise all people sing:

For He shall have dominion o’er river, sea, and shore,

Far as the eagle’s pinion, or dove’s light wing can soar.

For Him shall prayer unceasing and daily vows ascend;

His kingdom still increasing, a kingdom without end;

The mountain dews shall nourish a seed in weakness sown,

Whose fruit shall spread and flourish, till time itself has run.

O’er every foe victorious, He on His throne shall rest;

From age to age more glorious, all blessing and all blest,

The tide of time shall never His covenant remove;

His name shall stand for ever, that name to us is Love!

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 3:1-9

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 baptised 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.”

Reflection

Luke sets the scene historically and prophetically for us in our reading today. He gives us enough historical information to say these events took place in the year 29 AD, the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. As we read on in today’s Bible passage, we find a quotation from Isaiah chapter 40, which is a prophecy about John. The Apostle John gives us a good summary of John the Baptist’s role in the first chapter of his Gospel. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” (John 1:6-8)

John was a significant and important part of God’s salvation plan, but he was not the light or the redeemer. He was the forerunner who came to get people ready for the one true Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Even though John was marked out as special right from before he was conceived, he didn’t simply begin his ministry when he felt like it. Rather, his ministry began when “the Word of God came to” him. The decision about beginning this ministry of witness was not John’s to make, but rather God’s decision. Note, however, that John was already in the wilderness, waiting for God to give him the right words to speak at the right time.

John then went out with the God-given message, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (v.3) It is important that we understand a couple of things about the baptism spoken of here. Firstly, this is not the same as Christian baptism, which Jesus commanded His followers to do later. Rather, this is a ritual washing that showed the desire of the person being baptised to repent of their sins and be forgiven. These are important Gospel themes, but it is still not the same as baptism for Christians today. Secondly, the act of being baptised did not and could not result in the person being forgiven for their sin.

John’s baptism did, however, proclaim the necessity of repentance. In other words, continuing to sin is not something that is possible for the Christian. Let me explain what I mean by that. I am not saying that Christians don’t sin, because of course we do until we die or Jesus returns. We are still subject to the fall. However, with the help of the Holy Spirit we do not continue to live in an ongoing pattern of particular sins. If we have been convicted of our sin, we ask for forgiveness and repent of it – turn away from that action and seek to do what is right instead. We may still fall into temptation in that area on occasion, but we will not keep on sinning in that way day after day.

Jesus began His public ministry with this message, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15) There is a consistency between the message of John and the message of Jesus. John was the forerunner who prepared the world and its people for God’s promised Messiah. Luke then goes on to quote the prophet Isaiah at length, showing how those words had been fulfilled through John and his ministry. John was literally out in the Judean wilderness proclaiming the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was getting people ready for God’s great plan of salvation that was about to be fully revealed and made effective in Jesus.

John’s message and the wording of it was not all about the love of God and how that overrides everything else, unlike that which many churches today proclaim. Rather, John’s message was a clear call to repentance as otherwise God’s judgment will follow. It was a call to holiness, faith and devotion. John even addressed some of the people listening to him as a “brood of vipers”! Can you imagine the reaction today if a preacher addressed a congregation in this way?! John was not trying to shock people, but was rather telling them how things were and are. None of us are good or deserving of salvation. It is only because of God’s grace, mercy, love and forgiveness that any of us can be saved. Amen!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, the message of Your salvation is truly glorious and beyond our understanding. By grace through faith, You have offered us eternal life in and through Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet as we read about and reflect upon this message we are challenged too, O Lord. There have been many people throughout history who have turned their hearts against the Gospel, just as there are many today who similarly refuse to believe the message of salvation. We pray that as the time for Christ’s return draws ever closer, You would draw increasing numbers of men and women to Yourself. Use us, we pray, to be mouthpieces in our time, just as John the Baptist proclaimed the truth in his. May Your name be ever glorified. In Jesus' Name we pray, amen.

Benediction

May Jesus Christ, the Son of God, perfect in you the image of His glory and gladden your hearts with the good news of His Kingdom; and the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with You this day and forever more, amen.