Stowe Church Sunday 7th January 2024

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST Mark 1:4-11

Mark’s Gospel has been described as the nearest thing we have to an eye witness account of Jesus, because it is based on the preaching of Peter and Peter was there with Jesus. Mark was very close to Peter and wrote down his words, in 1 Peter 5:13 Peter actually calls Mark ‘my son’. The Gospel was written about 65 AD so only 30 years after Jesus death and resurrection and it contains little personal details missing from the other Gospels that Peter knew and included.

Mark’s gospel does not start with the nativity but with the words ‘This is the beginning of the story of how Jesus, the Son of God, brought the good news to men’. And Mark goes on straight away to tell us about the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin. John lived as a nomad in the wilderness between Judea and the Dead Sea, a hot desert, where he lived on locusts and wild honey – very plain and simple fare.

John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt, as had the prophet Elijah. To look at John and the way he lived, the people would have been reminded of prophets from hundreds of years earlier – in fact the Jewish people had not had a significant for prophet for about 300 years – and now, here was John, and how he lived and what he said had a powerful impact. The Bible tells us that people flocked to hear him and to be Baptised.

John’s message was in 2 clear parts:

1. John told people that they needed to confess their sins and be baptised. It is only when we feel sorry and say sorry that God can forgive us. It is only when we acknowledge that we need God’s help that we will accept the help that he offers.

This is as true today as it was then and often human pride gets in the way. Acknowledging that we have done wrong involves swallowing our pride and asking for God’s help and forgiveness. And God wants to forgive us so much that Jesus came to die on the cross, for us.

I love the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who doesn’t just forgive his son when he returns home, but is watching out for him. And when he sees him in the distance the father runs to meet him – such a wonderful illustration of God our Father and how much he loves and wants to forgive us.

So, John is urging people to confess their sin and he baptises them in the river to wash that sin away.

1. John is very clear that he is preparing the way for the one who is coming next, Jesus. In fact John says that he is not worthy to even loosen the strap of Jesus sandal, the job of a lowly slave. John says that while he baptises with water, Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit. John is preparing the way for the Christ, the Messiah, for God himself.

And in verse 9, Jesus himself appears and is baptised.

Some have asked why Jesus, who had not sinned needed to be baptised? Jesus as we know, was fully human as well as being divine, and John the Baptist’s ministry was bringing people back to God. So, when Jesus is baptised I think he is identifying himself with the mission of bringing people back to God.

And Jesus baptism marks the start of his own earthly ministry. For 30 years Jesus had lived a human life with his family, and here, at his baptism, his salvation ministry visibly starts – its like a public declaration.

God the Father is heard saying ‘You are my beloved son’ – words of approval and identification, ‘I am pleased with you’. God the Father is blessing his son at the start of his ministry and letting people know very clearly who Jesus is.

Then the Holy Spirit descends like a dove – Jesus is equipped for the task ahead. John had said that he baptised with water and the one who followed him would baptise with the Holy Spirit and here the crowd clearly see the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove – the symbol of gentleness.

John’s preaching, we are told in Matthew and Luke, was tough like an axe being taken to the root of the tree. But Jesus is given the dove; gentleness.

Jesus will go on to conquer death and sin itself but gently and with love – a wonderful illustration of the gentle loving nature of our Saviour.

So, Jesus born a helpless baby to a poor family that first Christmas day, starts his ministry to save us all, with his baptism, his Father’s blessing and the Holy Spirit descending. And the Holy Spirit is still with us today. Perhaps as we start this new year of 2024 our resolution, both as individuals and as a church, could be to listen to the gentle, loving Spirit of God and ask for his guidance in the year ahead. Happy New Year.