

Brackenhurst Methodist: 8 March 2009
The Prepared Christian: With Jesus in his Baptism

Welcome & Notices

Scripture:

Mark 1:9-13

Message

INTRODUCTION

- Acknowledge content in sermon series comes from Trevor Hudson, he noted Henri Nouwen “The Life of the Beloved”, and I’ve used NT Wright as a resource for this morning’s sermon.
- Today we look at a very simple story
 - Yet a story that if we are prepared to listen to it speaks deeply to many of us
 - * And particularly men
- It is a story of a son and his father, and a son finding affirmation from his Father
 - Something which often I think doesn’t often happen
 - * Particularly men, I think, but there are many children who never hear a father say
 - Either in words, or looks, or hugs
 - * “You are my dear child,” never mind “I’m pleased with you”
- I know I have a difficult relationship with my father, and I know that many other men struggle with the same thing
 - Yet here we have an example of Jesus and his own Father
 - * and in that this incredible affirmation that he gets from God, “You are my Son whom I love, with you I am well pleased”
 - Something which I think many men would love to hear from their fathers.
 - * And something which affects the way we see and understand God
- But it is this affirmation that gives Jesus the strength and ability to go out and to start the ministry which he has been preparing for
 - This is the beginning of the Jesus story
- Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, spent time growing up
 - about thirty years becoming the person God wanted him to be, and now just before he begins his ministry he comes to be baptised by John
 - Imagine that — 30 years of preparation for three years of ministry
 - * And maybe that’s why he was so effective

- But he is baptised by John, and goes into the wilderness to face temptation — and we'll look at that next week — and then he is ready and he begins proclaiming the good news of God.
- So this morning I want to look at how this act of baptism worked to prepare Jesus for the ministry which he was about to embark on.
 - And how being aware of what happened in his baptism can prepare and encourage us in our ministry
 - * Whether that is as an ordained or lay person in the pulpit
 - * Or is the ministry that all of us have to the people around us, be they family members or colleagues or peers.
- So what do we see happening that sets Jesus on his path of ministry?
 - Heaven is torn open
 - The Spirit descends
 - and God speaks

(1) Heaven is torn open

- The story of Jesus baptism is one of the few that is included in all four of the gospels
 - The three accounts in the synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke are all essentially the same, and in John's gospel, John the Baptist simply mentions that he did baptise Jesus and saw the Spirit descend upon him
- But in the synoptics a curious phrase is used
 - The authors speak about heaven being opened.
 - * Mark says that Jesus saw heaven being torn open...
- And this is the first thing that I want to speak about this morning
 - As Jesus sets out on his path of ministry he sees heaven being torn open.
- What does that mean?
 - Does it mean that he saw heaven coming apart, and angels falling out of the sky?
 - Does it mean that Jesus saw a little door open up miles up in the sky?
 - * Of course not!
- If we go back to the biblical roots we realise that it means far more than this
 - When the word heaven is used in the Bible it doesn't often refer to a place we go to when we die
 - * Rather it refers to another dimension of reality
- It refers to the spiritual realm as opposed to the physical
 - And so as we see — and Jesus sees — heaven being opened it's as though an invisible curtain right in front of us is pulled back

- And instead of seeing the world that we are used to seeing
 - whether that is the river Jordan and John and crowds of people
 - * Or whether that is roads blocked with traffic
 - * Or an economic system falling apart
 - * Or our own struggles or crimes in our country
 - * Or lack of love in our lives
 - The curtain is pulled back and we see before us a different reality altogether
- In order of Jesus to begin his ministry and be strengthened he needed to see that different reality
 - He needed to see the real world that he operated in — the spiritual one, rather than the physical one.
 - * And you will remember that as he continued he he a similar experience before going to the cross, when he went up the mountain and was transfigured into a spiritual being
- If we are going to have the strength for a spiritual journey, strength for ministry we need to know that the world in which we operate is not the same as the world in which we live.
 - * Mostly we don't have the privilege of seeing heaven opened before us, and so most times we walk by faith, rather than by sight
- The Christian journey is learning to live by this different reality even when we can't see it
 - And in that way we do what St Anselm, one of the church fathers counselled — we believe in order to understand
 - * We take the step of faith
- We live what we believe to be true, rather than what we know to be true
 - And in that way we see heaven being opened and the power and the presence of the Spiritual realm in our lives
- So we seek heaven opened, or at least faith in heaven being before us as we journey.

(2) The Spirit descends

- Secondly, as we look at how Jesus was prepared for his ministry we see that Jesus saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove
 - Now where Mark and Matthew speak of the Spirit descending upon Jesus, Luke uses the term the 'Holy Spirit'
- Luke and Acts, as you know, were written by the same person, two volumes of the same book
 - And in both books the Holy Spirit features frequently

- But while in the gospel stories we find Jesus on earth ready to begin his ministry, heaven is opened and the Spirit descends
 - At the beginning of Acts heaven is opened once again, but this time Jesus ascends, leaving his followers with the promise that the Holy Spirit will come upon them
 - * In fact a command not to do anything until the Holy Spirit comes
- And indeed, it is while they were waiting and praying in Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit did descend upon them.
 - And just as the presence of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism equipped him and empowered him for his ministry so do does the presence of the Spirit on his first followers in Jerusalem equip and empower them for their ministry
 - * And heaven is opened up
 - * And the word is proclaimed
 - * And thousands are added to their number
- So the Spirit descends for a purpose:
 - the purpose of affirmation and the purpose of ministry
- The Holy Spirit does not come just to make us feel good, and we should not be seeking after Holy Spirit experiences just so that we can chalk up another God experience in our lives
 - Rather the Spirit descends in order to reveal to us another dimension, another reality to live our life by, to affirm that we are God's beloved children
 - * And to set us free to minister, not in our own strength, but in God's
- John Wesley, by the grace of God one of the founding fathers of Methodism speaks of experiencing the Holy Spirit by saying that his heart was strangely warmed.
 - He had been an ordained Anglican priest for many years, ministered, gone over to America where he had had a difficult ministry
 - * And journeyed back to England a very disappointed and disheartened man
 - Someone who was seeking something deeper in his faith, who'd had conversations with other believers and was searching deeply for a more meaningful religion
- And he writes this in his journal, from MAY 24 1738:

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation: and an assurance was given me,

that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

- He later describes the experience thus: I exchanged the faith of a servant for the faith of a son.”
 - And it is really from that moment that the ministry entrusted to Wesley took off, people’s lives were changed, and the Methodist movement truly began
 - * And every year as Methodists we celebrate Aldersgate Sunday, closest to 24 MAY in which we remember this event in Wesley’s life
 - When the Spirit descended to empower him, to set him free, for ministry
- And so Jesus is prepared for ministry by seeing heaven opened and being given a glimpse of an alternative reality, by being empowered by the Spirit

(3) God speaks

- And then finally by hearing God’s voice speaking those words that we all long to hear:
 - “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”
- These words seem to echo the words from Psalm 2:7
 - A psalm that was sung during the inauguration of the Kings of Israel.
 - * These were words which the crowds sung on behalf of God to the new king who was being crowned
- And now, right at the start of Mark’s gospel, we see, not the crowds, but God himself, proclaiming Jesus to be king
 - And it is after this that Jesus goes forth proclaiming the Kingdom of God being at hand.
- But as I mentioned earlier, though, these words are probably also words that many of us long to hear from our earthly parents
 - Words that affirm to us that after years of having told that we’re not behaving as we ought
 - * Whether not studying hard enough
 - * Or not being good enough
 - * or to behave
- That actually we did turn out alright and that our parents are actually pleased with who we have become
 - And I think many parents do feel that way, but probably in our culture, those who come from a stiff upper lip British culture even parents, especially fathers, who do love and are well pleased with their children, and are delighted with them

- * Find it very difficult, find themselves tongue tied or embarrassed to tell their children that
 - And so often the opposite happens and parent children relationships are characterised by angry voices, bitter rejection and the slamming of doors.
- Friends, even if we don't hear our parents, our fathers saying these words to us I want to assure you that God says it
 - When God speaks those words to Jesus as Messiah, Messiah, the Anointed One, he speaks them to the one who represents his people
 - * the one who represents you and me
- So here is the good news: the whole Christian gospel can be summed up in this point:
 - When the living God looks at us
 - * Each one of us, without exception
- He says to us what he said to Jesus on that day
 - He sees us, not as we see ourselves
 - Not as we think our parents see us
 - * But he sees us as we are in Jesus Christ
- And he says, "You are my dear, dear child. I love you, and I'm delighted with you."
 - Won't you say that to yourself and put your own name in there?
 - * I think we miss hearing that too often
- So Jesus is prepared for his ministry by seeing a vision of a different, spiritual reality, by the Spirit descending, and by hearing words of love and affirmation from this Father.

CONCLUSION

- Let me close off as I speak a bit more about who we are
 - I think many times we try to hide from the truth of God's words to us
 - * Maybe we simply don't think we're worthy
 - * We don't deserve them
 - * They don't apply to me, maybe to somebody else, but I'm just not holy enough,
 - Or maybe we are just too busy to make time to hear the words
- Maybe we try to find our worth in other ways
 - Through our work
 - Through our family
 - Through our hobbies
 - Our relationships with our buddies

- And we miss out that we are God's beloved
 - And because we miss out on that truth, we also miss out on being able to share that truth with others
 - * We miss out on being able to affirm others in their place of need.
- You see, in this story of the baptism of Jesus, as soon as he had heard those words, and come up out of the water
 - He was sent into the desert
 - * He went from a place of affirmation
 - A place where he could see heaven, experience the Holy Spirit, hear the voice of God
 - * to a place where he was tempted
 - * to a place where there was no affirmation, a place where there were no hugs
- He went into the world that most of us live in every day
 - And I wonder when was the last time that many of us were able to give or to receive a 'hug'
 - * And I use the word hug not literally, but as an indication of an affirming or encouraging experience
 - And not just us, but many of the people around us
 - * Story of husband and wife in for counselling
- There are so many people all around us, who simply need to hear that
 - And so much fighting and anger and conflict is caused because people don't
- God's words to Jesus in his baptism are first and foremost affirming.
 - They are hug words, and his baptism is a hug experience.
- As we continue journeying with Jesus
 - As we have spent today with Jesus in his baptism
- Perhaps being reminded, maybe not of the occasion, but of the meaning of our own baptisms
 - Can we go out begin affirmed?
- And being able to hug those around us, many of whom are crying out just for some affirmation in their own lives
 - Maybe those are colleagues
 - * Or people at school with us
 - * Or friends
 - * Or people who work for us
 - And probably, especially, our children
- Can we, being filled with the Holy Spirit, go out and hug those around us?
 - And in that way bring the presence of Christ into the world?

- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen

Prayer of Response and Intercession

- Closing Song

Benediction

Doxology