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Inbox



Stephen Gamble

Sun, Jul 10, 5:00 PM (17
hours ago)

to me

Sermon for the Patronal Festival at John the Baptist, Wakerley

Isaiah 40

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice of one calling:
“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

6 A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?”
“All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

7 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever.”

9 You who bring good news to Zion,

go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
“Here is your God!”
10 See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
11 He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.
Luke 3:1-18

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
6 And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

10 “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

11 John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

13 “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

“You brood of Vipers!”

How's that for a welcome?

You come all the way out into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist speak, and maybe be baptised by him, and how does he greet you?

“You brood of Vipers!”

Maybe he needed to work on his customer service skills?

“Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

I wonder why people didn't turn back?

Perhaps they had guilty consciences?

Perhaps they thought they deserved being told off?

Or perhaps they thought the people around them needed telling off, and John was the man for the job?

We don't like being told off, we don't like to think of ourselves as bad people, and being told off can stir up feelings of guiltiness.

Conversely, it can also temporarily batter down feelings of guilt if we have a bad conscience and imagine we deserve the punishment.

We may well quite like certain people being told off, people we are fed up with, people who have annoyed us, people who have done us wrong.

Perhaps with John as my model I should call you all a "brood of vipers"?

What a rotten lot you are! Turn from your wicked ways else destruction will befall you!

I sometimes hear people lament the passing of 'fire and brimstone' preaching.

Repent because the End of the World is coming and your punishment awaits you!

John's warning is that Jesus is coming is similar, so you had better repent, he declares,

"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Now – has he got that right?

We hear these passages at Advent in the glow of fairy lights and nostalgia, they are so familiar and comforting that perhaps we do not take notice, but did Jesus winnow and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire?

Did John the Baptist get that right?

Jesus healed the sick.

He sat and ate with sinners.

He taught of the Kingdom of Heaven, how it was like a man sowing a field, or a mustard seed growing.

He taught us to call God our heavenly Father, he taught love of neighbour, and even that we should love our enemies.

He taught that we should forgive, and that God forgives us.

He was sharp with the Pharisees and Scribes, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."

Hypocrisy made Jesus cross, especially 'holier than thou' hypocrisy from religious people.

However, Jesus did not put the stick about, he did not punish people for their wickedness.

He could of done so, as the Son of God he had the power, and the moral authority to judge, but he did not. We who cannot rightly judge do, God who rightly can offers forgiveness.

But Jesus did point out the hypocrisy of those who do judge.

Here's how most religion works.

There is a set of moral laws given by God.

God polices them with divine punishments handed out from heaven.

He also appoints a professional Priesthood to go around warning people of the terrible consequences of breaking His laws.

The thing to do if you have broken one of God's laws is to be very sorry, and God might forgive you. Offering a sacrifice of some kind may make God believe you are really sorry, so do something good to make up the balance for the wrong you have done, or give something costly to God by way of a sacrificial apology.

As John the Baptist warns, "The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

But Jesus turned religion on its head.

According to Jesus the law of God is the law of love, 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.'

Love is harder to keep than law, because love demands perfection, and there are no legal loop holes with love.

We thought we occasionally fell short of a moral law or two, but Jesus points out we constantly fall short of perfect love, yet according to Jesus God does not threaten judgement – He offers forgiveness.

At the cross Jesus was winnowed and burnt up with unquenchable fire, he was axed and cut down and thrown into the fires of hell.

Here's the ultimate turning upside down of religion - God makes the ultimate sacrifice for sin. He offers Himself. Jesus and the Father are one.

At the cross God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are one as they always were, and always shall be.

It turns out we are the judgemental ones in need of a sacrifice in order to believe in forgiveness, not God.

The baptism that John administered was a sign of God's forgiveness.

Into the waters of baptism, our sin washed away, arising from the waters cleansed.

In baptism we are buried with Christ, and with Him rise to new life.

Sin and the destructive consequences of sin are left in the watery grave, freed from judgement we are free to love as God intended.

Sin brings it's own terrible consequences without the punishment of God or anyone else, including ourselves.

As John the Baptist himself proclaimed,

"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"

#JohntheBaptist #Forgiveness #Judgement #Sacrifice

Sermon for St Peter's, Barrowden (St Peter's Day Readings)

Acts 12: 1-11

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. 3 When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. 4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 Suddenly an angel of the

Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

8 Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. 9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

Matthew 16: 13-19

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew we heard an account of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples, a conversation initiated by Jesus asking them, 'Who do people say I am?'

Everything Jesus said and did spoke of who he was, he words and actions seemed to speak of the nature of God, but he was careful to let people work it out for themselves rather than tell them directly too often.

Jesus was a good teacher – if you want people to learn it is better to let them work it out for themselves rather than just tell them, that way they take ownership of the knowledge and remember it.

In the conversation Jesus at first asks his disciples who other people say that he is, rather than asking them what they think.

To his question He gets the reply, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’

Now these characters were all dead, so the disciples’ answer is surprising.

The things Jesus did reminded people of events and writings recorded in the Old Testament, so some people thought perhaps Jesus was an Old Testament figure come back to life.

The disciples were clearly grasping at straws, but how else could they explain Jesus?

Many people today regard Jesus as a ‘good man’ who spoke wise and beautiful words, and who met a tragic end. The trouble with that is it does not fit the accounts we have of him, or the response of people to him. Jesus healed, controlled the elements, forgave sins, worked miracles, spoke with authority, and echoed the words of God, he did not act or speak only as a ‘good man’, and people did not respond to him only as a ‘good man’ – they responded to him as a man and God.

There are some who do not believe Jesus existed at all, such a belief can only be sustained through complete ignorance of the facts, no serious historian would contest that Jesus lived, even if many would contest the facts of his life, and most would contest the meaning of his life.

Jesus next asks the disciples, ‘But what about you? Who do you say I am?’

Now this question required of the disciples a personal statement of belief.

Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

This answer seems to come out of nowhere, or rather, as Jesus says, it comes from God.

Peter is saying two things, firstly that Jesus is the Christ, that is the Messiah, the long expected Saviour come to rescue Israel from foreign domination, and secondly and here is gets cosmic, that Jesus is not only human but also divine.

Christians believe that if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

It is like God turned up in human flesh and blood, and said, ‘now do you understand me?’

Jesus is God's great self-revelation; Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

As Clement of Rome wrote, 'Through Jesus we can look up to the highest heaven and see, as in a glass, the peerless perfection of the face of God.'

If you want to know what God is like, read the gospels, the four accounts of the life of Jesus contained in the New Testament.

That Jesus is divine is the foundation of the Church.

It is what defines the world wide Christian community of faith that we know as the Church. Indeed, Jesus says in response to Peter, 'on this rock I will build my Church.'

Jesus did not leave behind a book of writings, or an Empire built by force of arms, he left behind a group of ordinary people, the disciples, mostly fishermen, bound together by a belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and committed to living by his teachings of love and forgiveness.

This makes the Church central to Christ's plan for his disciples and for the world, central to what it means to be a Christian.

Peter the rock, with his God given revelation of faith, began the work of building the Church, a work that we continue to this day.

The Church today is still a group of ordinary people bound together by a belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and committed to living by his teachings of love and forgiveness.

You don't have to go to Church to be a Christian, but if you don't you are missing the point.

Church is a bit like the pub, a place to be with people, to be in a community. You can sit at home and drink, but drinking is a social activity so if you are alone with your pint you are actually missing out. Pubs, like churches, have in recent years come under pressure, in our individualistic society folk prefer to drink alone just as many prefer to work out their faith alone.

In truth other people can be hard work, both down the pub and in the church, but nothing in this world that is worth having comes easily, it takes discipline and dedication.

Church is the place to practice loving so that out in the world you may be accomplished in the practice of love.

In Church we find communion with each other and with God, we get to know God through Jesus Christ, and we get to know each other, but most of all, we learn about ourselves.

This is perhaps the most surprising thing that being a part of the Church brings – self-knowledge.

It is especially surprising because what is revealed in us as time goes by is the image of God, a broken image, yet still the image of God that Peter saw so perfectly in Jesus.

We are all created in the image of God, created good, even if we all let that original image get tarnished and obscured by the bad that we do.

Such is the love of God that through Jesus he offers us forgiveness, and by the Holy Spirit He offers to clean and restore us to our original beauty.

Like Peter imprisoned, by the grace of God our chains fall off, and we are freed to be who God created us to be.

As Saint Peter himself wrote, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

May we, the disciples of Jesus, hear His call and follow His ways.

May we work with Jesus to build his Church.

Amen.

#Jesus #StPeter #Church