

Sermon 10th January 2016

Introduction:

In our first reading, Isaiah calls out in anguish to God. "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!" Judah was in a terrible mess. The country was overrun by the Babylonians. The temple was destroyed. The people were desperate. Our reading ended with "You have hidden your face from us and made us waste away."

How many people since have cried out similar despairing calls for God to come and help them in times of distress. And how many times does God seem distant, perhaps indifferent, unreachable, locked behind the doors of heaven. If only he would rend the heavens and come down.

What a contrast when we come to the gospel reading. God does indeed come down. Not once, not twice but 3 times, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The triune God active and compassionate in His world.

The occasion is Jesus' baptism. We are now some 30 years on from the Christmas story. Jesus steps out of obscurity to be publicly baptised at the commencement of his 3 years ministry.

The good news of great joy was about to unfold before us through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God. Life for mankind will never be the same. No wonder it starts with a bang. The triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit joining together, as one, to herald the bringing of love, hope, forgiveness, reconciliation and eternal life to the people on earth.

Let me remind you in the words of the NIV.

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too, And as he was praying heaven was opened" God had indeed rent the heavens. " and the holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven You are my son whom I love. With you I am well pleased.

Picture the scene.

The heavens opened.

What picture does that conjure up in your imagination?

Was there a low cloud base and suddenly it parted and down came the Holy Spirit like a dove?

More likely in the hot desert it was a cloudless blue sky! What did people see?

Where is heaven? Is it up there?

When the Bible was written and for centuries later everyone knew the world was flat. It was easy to think "up there" was heaven. When there was a storm, with thunder and lightning God or the gods were angry and when a volcano erupted it wasn't difficult to think that hell was under our feet and if you weren't careful you might be taken down to a terrifying place of perpetual fire!

We now know the earth is round and orbits the sun. We also know the universe extends in all directions with no evidence that it comes to an end. Its breathing takingly, awe inspiringly vast.

So where is heaven? Heaven certainly isn't simply "up there"!

And whilst we grapple with these ideas, what about the Holy Spirit descending in bodily form like a dove. How do you picture that? Are we to understand that high up the heavens seemed to open up

and there in the sky was a dovelike creature that came down and rested on Jesus. Was it a slow descent, or did it happen very suddenly. Swish and it was all over. We aren't told what the Holy Spirit did next. Was it sitting on Jesus' head? Or shoulder? Or did it seem to evaporate. He isn't mentioned again; what was the purpose of this dramatic event?

Again it asks questions that we can't really answer.

The voice of God.

The drama finishes with a voice, the voice of God, "And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son whom I love. With you I am well pleased". How on earth do we picture this? Was it a voice right up the sky, a sort of megaphone booming voice or was it perhaps a more intimate, local sense of hearing a voice which frankly no one knew where it came from?

I wanted to pause and ask these questions because this is a very familiar passage and we could so easily just accept what it says without using any imagination at all and want to pass on.

The Amazing story of the baptism scene.

But I want us to drink in something of the magnitude of what is being presented to us.

It is an amazing story of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit being together, on earth, at a turning point in history when the Son of God sets off on his epic task to bring salvation to all peoples.

The trinity displayed.

I can't think of any other passage of scripture when the 3 members of the triune God are brought together, as separate persons, and are individually active on earth. It is a key passage for glimpsing the truth of the trinity. There are many verses which mention all three together like for instance, the benediction: Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all ever more. Amen. But it's a summary of their roles not a scene where they are actively performing them.

So as we think about these verses let us take each member of the trinity in turn and see what it tells us.

The role of Jesus.

The passage starts by telling us 2 things Jesus did.

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too.

He identified with the people.

The very first thing Jesus did as he started his ministry was to identify with all of mankind.

This wasn't a stage managed occasion where an important person was given pride of place. Ordinary people were kept at bay. Protocol determined who had front row seats and so on. People, without distinction came to be baptised, to repent, to seek God including hated tax collectors and soldiers as well as every body else. And Jesus joined in. He had no sin to repent of. But he demonstrated his identity with us all without distinction.

His main mission was to bring us salvation through his death, resurrection and ascension. But when we consider the invisible nature of the Father and Holy Spirit we realise the wonder of seeing God, incarnate, here on earth.

He identified with us. We can identify with him.

We can relate to him, we know he experienced so many human trials and difficulties. When we wonder whether God really cares about suffering we need only look to the Lord Jesus. Moved with compassion when confronted with the sick, the lame, the blind. When he met a widow about to bury her only son he was moved with compassion. At Lazarus' grave he was moved to tears. When he saw people milling around, like sheep without a shepherd he was again moved with compassion and taught them. He hated hypocrisy and proud people, he showed amazing love and grace to people who had got themselves into all sorts of difficulties. He showed forgiveness, mercy and compassion to those who had done wrong.

We should read and reread the gospels just to marvel at what God in Christ was really like. Even as they crucified him he asked the Father to forgive them.

Jesus prayed.

Then we read Jesus did something else.

As Jesus was praying the heavens opened.

The other gospels tell us this was as he came up out of the water having been baptised.

He was praying. We might have imagined that was superfluous for Him. After all he was also God. But no. And He prayed many many times whilst on earth. It was clearly vital to him to maintain this close fellowship with his father. Before choosing the disciples he prayed all night. We all know about his agonising prayer in Gethsemane.

Father and Son were absolutely together whilst Jesus fulfilled his earthly mission. Prayer and this close relationship sustained Jesus in his work.

It isn't surprising then to discover that Jesus taught his disciples to pray and they in turn emphasised it to all the people in the churches as the gospel spread.

This isn't the occasion to preach about prayer except to emphasise the fact that when we pray to the Lord Jesus we pray to someone who can sympathise with the very feeling of our infirmities, one who was tempted, just as we are, except he never sinned. One who knows tiredness, hunger and thirst, rejection by loved ones, hatred by others. Let us come often to the throne of grace with confidence in our times of need.

The role of the Father.

What can we say about God the Father?

His authority and blessing.

The first thing that struck me was that the whole scene had God the Father's authority and blessing.

None of it would have happened unless God, who so loved the World, had sent his only begotten Son into this world. He wasn't a passive bystander: He was the author who made it happen because he loved and cared for his creation and longed to bring us into a lasting relationship with himself. .

The testimony he gives at the baptism that he loved his son and was well pleased with him clearly includes his approval of all that Jesus represented. So all the things I have just said about Jesus and his compassion had the Father's full approval and delight.

God is not remote.

So all this talk about the heavens needing to be rent open to stir a remote, disinterested God is purely a human reaction to our experiences in life. God is not remote. He is indeed a God of love and in the coming of Jesus we see demonstrated his determination to express that love. One of the most important things to learn is whatever happens in life – and some things are certainly unpleasant and unwanted – God is always with you. He will never leave you or forsake you.

In God we live and move and have our being. He is not far from anyone of us.

The Role of the Holy Spirit.

The passage says very little; heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.

It does read as though the purpose of heaven opening was to let the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus.

It must have been to perform an important role.

At first one wonders why he had to come to Jesus. Wasn't Jesus capable of doing things on his own?

Surprisingly perhaps, I think the answer is no.

Jesus laid aside his eternal nature when he became man. We read he learnt obedience by the things he suffered. He was tempted, He struggled with the prospect of the cross. The Holy Spirit appears to have indwelt the Lord Jesus, strengthening him, guiding him.

Immediately after the baptism we read the Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. And in this state was driven to be tempted. Tempted it seems on the very question of whether he really would live and prove to be the Son of God.

At the end of his ministry Jesus taught his disciples that he would send this Holy Spirits to them. He would live within the hearts of all who believed in Jesus. His task is to make the things of God real in our experience as humans.

The fruit of his life within would be to develop within our sinful hearts love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. To be more like Jesus himself.

Conclusion

So what is our response to this account of Jesus setting out on His earthly mission with the full approval and blessing of His Father, and the inner help of the Holy Spirit?

1. Gratitude : Make no mistake nothing more amazing or important has even occurred on this earth and its freely offered to us. We should gratefully thank God and rejoice in His love and grace.
2. To anyone who has never committed their lives to the Lord Jesus this is a call to seek Him today.
3. To all of us let us not neglect the gift of prayer and the sense of God's presence.
4. Let us not ignore the Holy Spirit, resist His work on our consciences, grieve Him by our sinful ways –but embrace Him and seek to walk in his ways.
5. In the name of the father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.