

Worship 3rd January 2021

Aberlour Parish Church

Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Intimations:

Buildings during Enhanced Lockdown

In light of the recent escalation in Covid-19 restrictions to Level 4, and acknowledging the rising numbers locally and nationally, the Government restrictions prevent us holding in-person Sunday worship services in the church building through January's enhanced level 4 Covid restrictions. We'll continue to monitor the situation going forward.

In the meantime, video services will continue to be uploaded to the Church Website, Facebook and YouTube, and paper copies will be available to those who wish them.

Introduction

This week we continue our journey through Luke's gospel and hear the way it describes the baptism of Jesus. This is an important episode in Jesus' life, and one the other gospels give great attention to. It is the meeting of John the Baptist and Jesus, and in some ways signal the 'handing over' of the message of John who was preparing the way, to Jesus who *is* the Way. And in Luke's account, Jesus' own baptism is a side-event, tagged in at the very end of a portrait of John's ministry. Even the description of John's ministry is strange: no description in Luke of the wild man John who wore camel hair and ate locusts, Luke's attention is on what John is saying and preaching. So what's going on here? And what is so important about what John is saying?

We begin our worship in song.

Hymn: *Lord the light of your love is shining*

1 Lord, the light of your love is shining
in the midst of the darkness, shining;
Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us,
set us free by the truth you now bring us.
Shine on me, shine on me.

*Shine, Jesus, shine,
this land with the Father's glory;
blaze, Spirit, blaze,
set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow,
the nations with grace and mercy;
send forth your word, Lord,
and let there be light!*

2 Lord, I come to your awesome presence,
from the shadows into your radiance ;
by your blood I may enter your brightness,
search me, try me, consume all my darkness.
Shine on me, shine on me.

3 As we gaze on your kingly brightness,
so our faces display your likeness,
ever changing from glory to glory,
mirrored here may our lives tell your story.
Shine on me, shine on me.

Graham Kendrick (b. 1950) Reproduced from CHA CD-ROM edition, number 448

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Prayer

Hidden God,
cocooned in mystery
like an animal hibernating in the earth,
you are not always parading your presence,
shouting to the world:
'Here I am. Here I am.'
Rather you often seem remote and distant,
sometimes we find it hard to know your presence at all.

When winter comes
and our lives are clouded by darkness and grief,
whisper a gentle word to our solemn souls.
Send it like a silent snowflake in the night
filling us with wonder when we awake,
reminding us that you are amazingly active even in what is dark to us.

When we have to face life's endings
and our hearts ache with loneliness,
gently enter our night
and show us how beauty is not absent
even when doors close
and lives reach their completion.

Let our faith in you
be a warm blanket to protect and to comfort.
Let our hope in you
be a clear, shining star on a winter night.
Let our love for you
be a welcoming haven when storms batter our world.

Let Jesus,
whose birth we celebrated in December darkness and who gives us life like green shoots poking

through the snow,
give courage to our fragile bodies and spirits,
now and always.
Amen.

Reading

Luke 3:1-22

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler 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 region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' ¹¹ In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' ¹² Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³ He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. 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 granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and

because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Hymn – *On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry*

- 1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh ;
awake and hearken for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.
- 2 Then cleansed be every heart from sin ;
make straight the way for God within ;
prepare we in our hearts a home,
where such a mighty Guest may come.
- 3 For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward ;
without your grace we waste away,
like flowers that wither and decay.
- 4 Stretch out your hand, to heal our sore,
and make us rise to fall no more ;
once more upon your people shine,
and fill the world with love divine.
- 5 All praise to you, eternal Son,
whose advent has our freedom won,
whom with the Father we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

Charles Coffin (1676–1749)

translated John Chandler (1806–1876)

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Reflection

In other gospels, the episode of Jesus being baptised is given a lot of space for the fullness of the story to be told; but we are going through Luke's gospel and Luke narrates this important period - this important transition and moment in Jesus' life- in only two verses, off to the side away from the rest of the action, in verses 21 & 22.

So what about the rest of what's happening in this story we just read?

Well we see something else characteristic about Luke the gospel writer and the way that he tells the story of Jesus from the way that he introduces this passage: with all these funny names and information about who was ruling where at what time. That's a way of beginning a story that we find in certain parts of the Old Testament - in particular, the prophetic books. Luke is concerned in this chapter with John the Baptist, but John drawn as a Prophet and so in the Old Testament where we get the beginnings of all the prophets -Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and and Daniel- all are introduced in the same manner. The formula goes: "In this year, during this reign of that monarch at this time when this person was doing something ... the word of God came to...." It's the same for Luke describing John: "In the time of Pilate and Herod and the emperor Tiberius, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah".

And what did that word of God say? Well it meant that John was out in the wilderness and he was preaching: he was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism. Repentance. Forgiveness of sins. Of those three things, we know what forgiveness of sins might look like and we probably think we know what repentance and baptism looks like too. But what's John actually doing out there in the wilderness? Well Luke tells us that he's drawing on the prophetic tradition and in a clear move that paints John as one of God's prophets, John's message is put in the words of Isaiah: with the vision of valley raised up and mountains made flat; crooked ways made straight; and that everyone, all flesh, will see the salvation of God.

So far, so good, so attractive.

But then when the crowds come to him, out in the wilderness by the River of Jordan, they come and hear John say to them: "You brood of vipers!" Now prophets famously are never soft with the words and often use extended hyperbole and big exaggerated images to make their point. But even for prophecy this is pretty strong, and John is saying it to these people's faces - it's a wonder he's not lynched! He also uses this image of the axe at the foot of the tree: in prophetic imagery the tree is often the people of Israel - from the first fathers, from Jacob, Isaac and Abraham - the tree of the people of God. John is saying that the axe is at the foot of the tree ready for it to be chopped down if it doesn't bear good fruit. This is a striking image for those who hear it, especially when John elaborates to say not to take pride in your lineage from Abraham because God can make sons of Abraham from even the very stones in the ground. So John has an invective here with a really harsh message for people and yet people are coming to hear him. That's a bit puzzling, and we have to wonder why that is.

Perhaps the best wondering we can do is to imagine if it were us: and ask what's it would be like to be there, to ask how we might feel? It is probably the case that many of us know that feeling where even though the words are not soft for us, even though they are challenging, there's a level of inspiration we receive; because when the world is wonky and the world seems upside down and we don't know what's happening around us, there's something of comfort and there's something compelling about being given an opportunity to act up into our best selves.

We saw that at the beginning of the coronavirus crisis where we were told everything around us is upside down and we're going to need this change and that change - and we have seen the best of so many people stepping up to the plate and in challenging times showing the best of what humanity

is. Perhaps that's the response that some people were giving to John: that he was telling them the world around you is really out of kilter, step up and come up to the mark.

And that's where we return to those two words from before: repentance and baptism.

Repentance is a bit of a dirty word in Christian circles sometimes. It is associated with preachers in high pulpits booming down below about fire and brimstone and the dangers of hell. That's very different to what those people would have heard (even as they were being told that they are a brood of vipers!). They wouldn't have heard the word 'repentance' in quite that way. Now it's doubtful John was speaking in Greek, but his words are recorded in the New Testament originally in Greek by Luke's hand; and in Greek the word translated as 'repentance' is '*metanoiete*'. I don't want to dwell long on this – but we can actually break this word down into chunk that make some sense to us in English. It comes in three parts: the prefix 'meta'; the noun which is being made into a verb 'noia'; and the ending '-ete'. The last part is simple. It is just a an ending of a word that says it's an imperative: you should do 'this'. And do 'what'? well that's the other two parts. First the 'meta'. This is the same 'meta' that turns 'physics' into *metaphysics*: so while physics is the study of the world around us and how things work and are put together - the whole matter of the world from atoms to galaxies; metaphysics is concerned with a sort of transcendence of those things. Metaphysics is about the philosophical nature of 'stuff', about human nature and souls and questions that push beyond the physical world. Metaphysics asks about soul and spirit and the way things are and why things are. Going from physics to metaphysics involves a kind of transcendence, a movement away from the physical and seen and testable to the ethereal, unseen, and realm of faith. A similar movement is happening with *metanoiete*, repentance : the meta is being used to turn around, to transcend, to be kind of above and beyond the 'thing'. And the 'thing'? That's where the second part of the word, the '*noia*' comes in. This '*noia*' is the same word that gives us the word 'paranoia' – a word which obviously is to do with psychology and our minds. It's roughly the same here: the '*noia*' is our mind in the sense of whole outlook on the world, the way we interact with the world and the things and people in it, our outward attitude to all that we encounter.

So this word '*metanoiete*' -repentance- when we put it together from those chunk adds up to the idea that we should be transcending our normal way of looking at the world. It's sometimes translated 'to turn around' and that's the sense that gives us a glimpse of what repentance really means: if we've been going in one (wonky) direction looking at the world one (skewed) way and interacting in the one (off-balance) manner: John's call to repentance is to be turned around and specifically turned around to see how God is acting in the world and what God wants of us in the world. That's what repentance is: a transformation. A transformation achieved not through fear (as with the old mistake of the hellfire preacher trying to scare people into changing their ways by threatening hellfire sermons) but achieved through an attractational transformation - a transformation that says "this is a way we could live, and this is the way God calls us to live, and we could be so much the better for it!"

If all of what I've said about repentance so far sounds very highfalutin and airy fairy then we need to return to what John was speaking about. Because John's vision of repentance is concrete, and earthly, and practical. The crowds come to John and they ask: "What does this repentance mean? What does it look like?" and John very clearly sets out a very practical vision of what repentance and living in the Kingdom of God looks like. John says that if you've got two coats, then give one to someone without; if you're extra to someone who doesn't have; if you've got more than you need to eat then give it to someone who's going hungry. The Tax collectors and soldiers some asking specific questions about their lives, and John gives then specific concrete answers.

John is not a popular figure when he speaks truth to power -we hear that when we're told how Herod gets upset with John and has him thrown into prison- and yet people come to hear and to be told by John what to do. And they are told to repent -*metanoiete*- and to be baptised.

And here we are finally at the story of Jesus' own baptism. Now in Luke's telling of the episode we're not given the vision of John wading into the water with Jesus, we're not given Jesus being dunked underwater and coming back up; we're not given a spectacle for the crowds to see of the heavens splitting open. And yet, in Luke's telling of Jesus' quiet, off-to-the side baptism while he's in prayer, the symbolism of what baptism is remains the same. It's the same symbolism we carry on through today when we baptise and mark water on people's heads; it's symbolism of new life and adoption into God's family; it's symbolism of dying to one way of life and of rising again to be re-born as a child of God; it's the same spiritual movement as that repentance, *metanoiete*, of turning from one direction beginning again in another, better direction. That better direction is towards that vision of Isaiah's: that everyone might see God's salvation.

Too often as Christians thinking about what it means to live a good life we get caught between whether we are doing it for the 'here and now' or whether in some way living a good life now is preparation for eternal life heavenly light. The whole point of Jesus -the whole point of this time after Christmas when we have celebrated God coming to earth as the God-man Jesus- is that any temptation towards a false dichotomy that puts a gulf between earth and heaven is now completely made nonsense. Because heaven has come to earth in Jesus Christ. And we live a good life here on earth not because we feel we need to or we're scared into it but because we pray that by God's grace the heavenly Kingdom of God might reign on earth as well as heaven. This is what we pray in the Lord's prayer when we say "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So let us hear John's words: John's preaching repentance and baptism for forgiveness of sins. Let us hear that message not as something scary or something to be put off by, but as a call to live into a vision of how great God's kingdom and as an invitation to receive the promise of what that could mean for us and our world.

Amen

Prayer

Lord, we pray 'give us this day our daily bread!'

We remember before you:

the many in our world from whom daily bread means daily struggle,
and far too often a vain struggle.
our brothers and sisters who are stricken by famine and shortages,
and oversupplied with despair.

Guide and inspire us to share the bounty of the fruitful earth
so that compassion becomes the key, the life, and the hope.

Lord, we pray 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!'

We remember before you:

the many who seek out glimpses of your kingdom,
those who answer the prophetic call,
and those in need of the justice that demands a fair share for everybody.

May we undergo the transformation of heart and mind
that will make us agents of God's kingdom and worthy of our calling to be God's children.

Lord, we pray 'forgive us our debts!'

We remember before you:

the many in our world beset by a sense of paralysing guilt;
those driven by forces within themselves over which they have little control;
those nursing the wounds of ancient sins now forgiven by those they hurt and by you.

Release and uplift them
so that they know the offer of freedom and life renewed
that lies at the heart of the gospel.

Lord, we pray 'deliver us from evil!'

We remember before you:

the many in our world beset by evils
of unjust, withering and wasteful conflict,
of oppression from compassionless leaders,
of rejection by the prejudices of communities and wider society.

Redeem and revive your fallen world

so that outcasts know themselves included in the feast of heaven,
and peace and right-purpose is pursued by leaders and trend-setters.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Blessing

Hymn - *Deep peace*

Deep peace of the running wave to you
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Deep peace of the gentle night to you
Moon and stars pour their healing light on you
Deep peace of Christ the light of the world to you
Deep peace of Christ to you

Music by John Rutter

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