

Study following Sunday January 3rd

Prepare: Think about the Wise men, travelling far to see Jesus and to worship him, contrast that with our experience of knowing him so close to us, it is just the journey of our hearts that enables us to be with him.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for his presence with us. As he came to be with us on that first Christmas, so he continually comes, by his Holy Spirit, to meet us where we are.

Passage: Read John 1.10-18

Ponder: Our reading today continues the Christmas season by giving us more of John's theological thoughts about Jesus' arrival. Earlier in the first chapter John sets out a contrast between those in darkness and those in the light, a passage we often hear during a Christmas service, and here in our passage today we hear of those who received him and those that didn't, those who believed in him and those who didn't believe.

- Think about what it means to believe, to receive Jesus into your life.

John continues 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us', and we are reminded of the Old Testament when Moses would meet God face-to-face in the tabernacle and on the mountain.

- See Exodus 33 and 34 for Moses' experience of God's presence

The literal translation of John's words say 'the Word came and *tabernacled* with us,' God 'pitched his tent among us'. For the Israelites, God's word was given to Moses on tablets of stone, but now, John says, God's word will walk among us meeting us in an even more personal way.

In the Old Testament we read of God's faithfulness and mercy, his covenant love or steadfast love, and although the word grace is rarely mentioned it is clear that what is being described is a graciousness that knows no equal. God's grace, mercy and love are poured out on his people through thick and thin, through ups and downs.

Now John describes 'Grace upon Grace', and commentators have found various ways of understanding what this 'grace upon grace' may mean. I think perhaps the best explanation, considering the verses around it, is to see the giving of the law as the beginning of grace, the law that gave God's people a boundary and a foundation. The law was the preparation upon which God then came, as Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth, in order to fulfil the grace first given.

- How do you make sense of 'grace upon grace'?

One way to remember what this grace means to us is to use the letters as initials for the phrase "God's riches at Christ's expense", Christ paid the price, we receive the favour, unmerited and unearned. And this grace comes to us in many ways and many forms, but perhaps it is chiefly received in times of difficulty and challenge. God reminds Saint Paul "My grace is sufficient, my power is made perfect in your weakness". (2 Cor. 12.9).

- Look at 2 Corinthians chapter 12 to see the full context of this verse.

Our challenge is to emulate Paul who explains: 'I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.'

Pray: Pray for all who want to believe and to receive Jesus but struggle to do so, because of family or cultural pressures, or due to past experiences that have left them scarred and confused. Pray that God would come to them, by his Spirit and through his Word, bringing healing and light, grace and peace.

Study following Sunday January 10th

Prepare: Think about your baptism and the declaration made over you - that you were Baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for his constancy in our lives, through creation, those around us, his word and his Spirit that dwells in us.

Passage: Read Acts 19.1-7

Ponder: Paul's third missionary journey took place between AD53 and 57 as he travelled across land to Ephesus in what is now modern day Turkey, but was then part of Greece. Whilst in Ephesus we read that Paul found some disciples, and questioned them. Paul's first question is about the reception of the Holy Spirit and it seems these disciples have not even 'heard there is a Holy Spirit'. This creates something of a puzzle as the Holy Spirit is referred to many times throughout the Old Testament and even by John the Baptist himself. John Stott suggests what they haven't heard of is the Pentecost event and the fulfilment of John's prophecy.

- How important is Pentecost in your understanding of being a disciple?

Effectively these disciples were living under the Old Covenant, of which John was the culmination, prophesying a new age to come. These disciples of John had been baptised into a baptism of repentance but not then heard the full story - the Jesus had come to fulfil John's prophecy. They had heard a partial message but not of its completion.

- How might the Christian message be communicated partially today?

To be sure, it is hard for us to hold the whole Bible message in our minds at once, there are so many facets for us to take in, like a he jigsaw puzzle. But these disciples of John had been given only half a jigsaw and Paul, having found the pieces that were missing, seeks to complete the overall picture for them.

There are some who use interpret this passage to show a 2 stage process of initiation into the Christian community, starting with faith and conversion and then being completed at the reception of the Holy Spirit. But these twelve men are not seen as typical conversions, this is an anomalous route to becoming a proper disciple. Stott highlights that the 'norm of Christian experience...is a cluster of four things: repentance, faith in Jesus, water baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

- How do you see discipleship related to Stott's fourfold list?

Paul completes the picture for these disciples by explaining that John was pointing to Jesus, who they should now believe in. He then places his hands on them.

- Read Acts 8.14-17 and compare to our passage today

This laying of hands seems to be part of a special symbolic prayer showing that those prayed for are welcomed in as part of the fellowship of the faith. As a result the disciples have what looks like their own 'Pentecost' event as they are caught up into the promised blessing of the Holy Spirit. Whilst this is an experience some still have today, I don't think it is a prerequisite to being a full Christian as some have suggested. This passage is clearly not a 'usual' baptism and so reading too much into the process would be unhelpful, but it is an indication that God meets people in different ways.

- Read some of the following passages to see how the Spirit may work in our lives: Ephesians 3.14-18, Romans 12.1-2, Acts 13.2, 1 Corinthians 12.7-11, Acts 17.16-17.

Pray: Pray for those who have not heard the full message of God's Good News. Pray for those who still do not have a Bible translation in their language, and for those who are working to create a translation that is meaningful for different cultures and peoples.

Study following Sunday January 17th

Prepare: Think about how power can be revealed in different ways in our world.

Praise: Spend time thanking God that he is sovereign over earth and heaven.

Passage: Read Revelation 5.1-10

Ponder: The Revelation given to John is a puzzling book but does contain much encouragement for us, along with links to the rest of the Bible.

- How do you find reading Revelation?

Many have sought, in this book, to find pointers to the future or even prophecies being fulfilled in every age. Our passage begins with God holding out the scroll in his right hand - the 'right hand' of the one on the throne has links to the authority to bless and also a symbol of strength and conquering power.

- See Genesis 48.12 and Exodus 15.6, 12.

The fact that the scroll is written on both sides may be an allusion to the scroll mentioned in Ezekiel 2 verse 9-10. The seven seals may well symbolise seven independent witnesses who testify that the scroll has not been opened. We learn that the only one worthy to open the scroll is the 'Lion' of the tribe of Judah,

- See Jacob's prophetic blessing in Genesis 49.9-12.

Ian Paul points out that often in the book of Revelation John first hears the symbolic significance of something and then he sees its symbolic meaning. In our passage John hears about the 'Lion of the tribe of Judah' and then sees a lamb. This is a lamb that bears the scars of being slaughtered and we are reminded of Jesus, the one who bears the scars for us.

- See Isaiah 53.7 to read of the suffering servant who is wounded for our healing.

There is another significant lamb found in Exodus 12.6, which protects the people from the angel of death that passes over Egypt, and then enables them to find freedom from slavery and passage to the Promised land. This lamb is also a link with the sacrifices of the day of atonement when the blood of lambs, and other animals, was a key part of the ritual that enabled Israel to recommit to their relationship with God.

The strikingly contrasting images of a lion and a lamb have captured imaginations for centuries. For the weak and struggling, the lamb has been an encouragement that God's strength shows through when we are vulnerable, that Jesus, too went through times of difficulty, but continued to show honour and humility even in the darkest hours. For those in power this is a reminder that no one is worthy but Jesus, that we should all bow in humility before the one who has triumphed.

The lamb has seven horns as a symbol of strength. The seven eyes show God sees all that occurs in the world, and then the seven spirits are a reminder that God continues to be active in the world by his Holy Spirit. So we are assured that God sees all that happens in the world, the darkness and the light.

- Have you ever wondered how God receives your prayers?

Pause for a moment and recall prayers prayed in times of joy and sorrow. Then imagine the scene that John has had revealed to him, our prayers rising like incense and then caught in golden bowls that are held before God by the elders.

Finally the presence of the lamb inspires a new song, that echoes the all encompassing nature of Christ's work, 'For God so loved the whole world...'

Pray: Pray for all who are vulnerable and going through trials at this time. Pray that we would be those who sing a new song of a new life won for us by Christ.

Study following Sunday January 24th

Prepare: Think about what it might sound like to hear the arrival of God and his heavenly host.

Praise: Spend time thanking God that he is preparing us, the body of Christ, for a great wedding feast with the Lamb, that is Christ.

Passage: Read Revelation 19.6-10

Ponder: Our passage begins with John hearing something, it is clear that his 'revelation' or 'vision' is more than just a picture in his mind. This is a 3D picture with surround sound too! Mention of 'rushing waters' is a link back to Revelation 1.15 and the sound of Jesus' voice at the beginning of the book.

- Look up Ezekiel 1.24 for an Old Testament use of this 'rushing water' metaphor,
- Also Daniel 10.6 for a roaring voice like a multitude.

We may also be reminded of the voice that was like thunder to some people in John 12 verse 29.

- How do you imagine a heavenly voice sounding?

The voice declares 'Hallelujah!' which is a compound Hebrew word meaning 'Praise the Lord' and becomes 'Alleluia' when transliterated into Greek. The praise is linked to the Lord God Almighty reigning, in the narrative this is as a result of the fall of Babylon. The 'Lord God Almighty' refers to God as the Commander of the Heavenly Armies - 'the Heavenly Army' being the Heavenly Host of Angels. In our own prayers we may reference God as the Almighty, which provides a powerful contrast to God as Father,

- Which phrase for God comes to mind if you are coming before him in prayer or praise? God reigning on the throne clearly gives rise to rejoicing and gladness. This then overflows into a description of the joyous 'marriage of the lamb'.

- Look at how Jesus used the metaphor of a marriage banquet in Matthew 22 verse 2

A first century Jewish wedding would begin with the betrothal and exchanging of vows, then there would be a period time before the celebration begins, as the bride leaves her family home to go to the groom's home.

- Note how Isaiah 25.6-8 speaks of the Lord of Hosts holding a banquet heralding a swallowing up of death and a wiping away of tears - both spoken about in Revelation 21. The passage closes with a comment on worship and where it is rightly given. For John's first readers, the Roman Emperor was the one to worship. Depending on the assumed date for the book of Revelation, this was either Emperor Nero or Domitian, both of whom oversaw persecution of Christians in AD68-70 or AD90-95 respectively. The Emperor held himself up as a divine figure worthy of worship. Although John is not guilty of Emperor worship, he does fall at the feet of the angel who has been speaking to him, at which he is told firmly 'Don't do that'. I am reminded of other 'agents of God' who either accidentally, or on purpose, receive worship that is due to God.

- How might we avoid placing objects or people before us as idols and objects of worship?

- How might we ensure that our worship is always focussed on our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Pray: Pray for all Christians to focus their worship on Jesus rather than on any intermediaries such as Church leaders or prophets of one kind or another. Pray, too, for those who give their worship to earthly idols rather than to the one who will inspire such rejoicing and gladness, who will swallow up death and wipe away every tear.

Study following Sunday January 31st

Prepare: Think about the role of mediators, seeking to bring together two parties with different outlooks, perhaps in business, marriage or even national disputes.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for Jesus, that he didn't come just to give us good advice, or to tell us about God's love, but to demonstrate that love in a supreme act of sacrifice and commitment to be able to mediate between us and God.

Passage: Read Hebrews 2.14-18

Ponder: Our passage today is a companion to Sunday's Gospel reading (Luke 2.22-40) which tells of Christ's presentation at the temple in Jerusalem. The book of Hebrews is an epistle directed primarily to Jewish converts to Christianity who may be tempted to convert back to Judaism or to Judaize the Gospel. The writer seeks to proclaim and persuade that Jesus Christ is the supreme revealer and mediator of God's grace. It draws from numerous Old Testament passages, that would have been well known to its readers of Jewish heritage. The epistle seeks to show Jesus as superior to the prophets, angels, Moses (the mediator of the original covenant) and Aaron (and his priestly succession).

- Read Hebrews 1.1-4 for the writers' prologue or summary.

In our passage we read of Christ's 'flesh and blood' existence, which enabled him to lure the Devil into a trap. The Devil, in his pride, relished Christ's death yet, as the early Church fathers explained, the Devil had acted like a greedy fish. The early Church Fathers saw Jesus' body as the bait, and inside him the divine nature which is the hook. Once the devil swallowed God, he was in real trouble because he could not digest or defeat God's eternal life. C.S.Lewis placed Aslan and the White Witch in a similar interaction in his book 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'. The White Witch rejoices over the death of Aslan before discovering that her pride had led her to fulfil an old promise that has left her defenceless. The result is that, in Christ and through Christ, we can trust that death is not the end, there is a greater power through which we have the victory.

- Read 1 Corinthians 15.50-58

Notice that St Paul takes this a stage further. He reasons that, just as Christ became fully God and fully Human to achieve what he did, so we will put on immortality and can say with Paul - 'Death is swallowed up in victory' (see Isaiah 25 verse 8).

The writer reminds us again, in verse 17, that Christ was fully human, and (verse 18) even tempted as we are. This is a saviour who understands all the difficulties of human life because he was born, lived and died as one of us. This final verse of our passage reminds us that Christ is willing and able to help all those who are tempted or tested, which probably includes all of us at this time of pandemic and lockdown.

- See Hebrews 4.15-16 and think about why it is important to know Christ was tempted. Later in this letter we are reminded to 'fix our eyes on Jesus' (Hebrews 12.2). It seems to me that this is the only way to conquer the fear of death. We must seek to keep Jesus in view by reading his words and deeds, offering him our worship, and sharing our doubts and fears in prayer. He will help us to see beyond this earthly existence, and have a hope of heaven, asking with Paul, 'O death, where is your sting?' (Hosea 13.14)

Pray: Pray for all those whose fear of death is stifling their life. Pray for ourselves, that as we struggle with all that is going on in our world today, we would be able to hopefully trust in our hearts that death is not the end, but the continuation of our life with Christ.