

## **21<sup>st</sup> February 2021 6pm The Spirit sends Jesus out from His Baptism**

Service led by Paul Lewis, Sermon by Val Whiteman, Bible readings by Geoff Whiteman, Stephen Prestwich and Paul Lewis. Prayers by Helen Lewis

*This transcript is only of the readings and the talk.*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22 [NIVUK 1984]**

18 For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, 19 through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison – 20 who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 21 and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Mark 1:9-15 – The baptism and testing of Jesus [NIVUK 1984]**

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, 13 and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

This is the word of our Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### **Sermon**

[Val Whiteman:] Let's have a moment of quiet while we think about the readings that we've just heard, and think about Jesus in the wilderness.

So it's the beginning of Lent, and we're starting to think about the start of Jesus' ministry. As Paul said earlier, the last time I was preaching, I think it was about the baptism of John, and now we're thinking about the very start of Jesus' ministry and His baptism. The gospel we had is Mark's gospel, and as you know it's what you might call the speedy gospel, lots of 'immediately's. And in the few verses from Mark that we heard, we get the baptism, the temptations, and the start of the ministry. There's an awful lot in there if you think about the same thing in Luke and Matthew, there's a lot more content. There are the temptations, for a start.

So, what does Mark think and what does, behind him, the revelation that Peter had of Jesus' ministry, what did they think were the important things that they wanted us as readers to remember here? Well, if you look, there are two speeches, actually two people talking.

- First of all, God says that Jesus is His Son, and He's pleased with Him.
- And then a little later, Jesus says, "The time has come. The Kingdom of God is here."

And between these two speeches Jesus is tempted. As a man He takes the battles of forces of evil, but as God, He conquers them now and throughout His ministry. The problems that we have as living as human beings are solved through Jesus.

So He proclaimed that the Kingdom, so long hidden, is now revealed in Him. Commentators say that the end of our reading, verses 14 and 15, where He proclaims that He is going to tell us about the coming of the Kingdom, but they're actually the summary of what's going to happen in the next part of the gospel, as the gospel writer sort of unpacks what the Kingdom of God means, as Jesus lives it. He travels through Galilee, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom.

Now, the Epistle reading, the reading from Peter, odd though it is, takes us to the end of Jesus' ministry and the effects on us of the Kingdom coming through Jesus. It's quite a challenging passage, as you'll have heard, there's the easy part and then the harder part.

- The easy part is the beginning. Jesus suffered death to enable all of us to experience salvation. Peter talks about the body being put to death and then Jesus being made alive in the Spirit, just as we are when we accept Jesus and His baptism. The John baptism was for the repentance of sin. Jesus' baptism, we renounce sin but we're filled with the Spirit of God, to live for Him.
- And then there's the second part of the reading, where Peter's talking about what happened after Jesus' death. You remember in our Creed we say, "Jesus descended into Hell, and then rose again," and this is the sort of the part that Peter is talking about. Now it may be a story from the Book of Enoch, but it developed over the centuries into one of my most favourite plays in the mystery play cycle, 'The Harrowing of Hell'.

I'm really sorry if you've heard me on this subject before, but it's worth a reminder. After the Crucifixion, the play shifts to a scene in Hell. In prison there are all of prophets and kings who spoke about Jesus and God's work in the Old Testament, and they're waiting as if in Limbo (This may be theologically unsound but it's good theatre) and they speak their prophecies, and they talk about their hope of the coming salvation. They know something is coming because God has told them through the prophecies and through the prophets that a King will come, but they're waiting and waiting and waiting for Jesus to come. Then some devils come to Lucifer, and tell him with great joy that they have ensured that Jesus is dead and will be in Hell shortly. Lucifer is absolutely horrified by the news. "What have you done?!!" he says. And at this point, Jesus arrives outside the gates of Hell. When I saw it, they projected the gates through a spotlight onto the stage, and Jesus as a silhouette behind them, shouts at the gates, "Lift up your heads, O you gates and be lifted up, you everlasting doors and the King of glory will come in!" (The words of Psalm 27). And at that point because the King of glory has come, the doors fall away, and to the discomfiture of all the devils, who are absolutely powerless, Jesus leads out the prophets and kings from Hell rejoicing that their salvation has come at last.

Now, whether Peter was meaning that or something else, he's making it clear that Jesus' death and resurrection has cosmic implications: it's not just good for us in the present. He likens the baptisms that Christians undergo to the saving of the eight members of Noah's family from the flood. As they were saved by water, so Peter says, we too are to be saved through baptism, accepting what Jesus has done for us by His death and resurrection. The striking thing about what Peter says is his utter certainty that Jesus' death has changed the universe for good and all, and that we, as His disciples, are part of that fundamental change.

Jesus has mended broken humanity, if we accept His grace to us. I think that's an amazing thing to start thinking about as we begin our Lent journey. It makes us think, "Well, who do we think Jesus is?" Now the Creeds and the foundation statements of the church from the beginning make it clear that Jesus was both man and God. There have been various heresies throughout history which have tried to soften this by stressing one or the other. Either He is completely man, or He is completely God, but Mark's having none of them. In Genesis, you remember, God created humans in His image, male and female created He them. In Jesus, part of the Godhead, God came as human into His world. And I think that is so amazing, so remarkable, that we have to pause and think about it. He fully identified with His creation, even to being tempted as we are, but without sin, as it says in Hebrews 4:15. It's because He was fully God and fully man that He's able to bring about the healing that we as humans need. It's wonderful news for us, now and always.

I don't know whether you've read the story by C.S. Lewis, which is called *The Great Divorce*<sup>1</sup>, which is looking at the difference between Heaven and Hell. It's only a novella, it's a slight book, but it's a really good read. And what C.S. Lewis suggests there is that when people die, they are in a sort of Limbo. I mean it's not sort of theologically serious, again it's a good story, but he says that if you want to, you can leave Hell and go to Heaven and there's the celestial bus that takes you with a bus driver. When C.S. Lewis, the figure in the story, gets to Heaven, where everything is so very, very solid, unlike Hell which is just dusk, no colour, no joy, nothing. When he gets there, he questions the person who comes to meet him, George MacDonald, his mentor. And he says, "Well, can't you go back down to Hell and tell people?" and George MacDonald says, "But nobody can, nobody except Jesus could do that, because it takes a miracle of miracles." And C.S. Lewis says, "But you know, there was a great chasm I came up. Why can't you do it?" And George MacDonald says, "Well look down at the grass: you see that little tiny crack where the ground has dried? You came up through one of those or something smaller. It is impossible for people to come from Heaven to Hell. Only Jesus, only Jesus can do that."<sup>2</sup> Only Jesus can bring the salvation that we need as human beings. And it's because He came as a child, as a human, that He can do that.

So this wonderful news, let us look at it, think about it as we as we go through Lent. Think about how you see Jesus. Do you see Him as fully God, fully man? And what part of His ministry do you think that God wants you to concentrate on? I want to end with a passage from 1 Peter chapter 1, which reminds us of where we stand before God.

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

Amen .

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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1 Various editions, including ISBN 978-0007461233

2 paraphrases