

SERMON – 13/1/19

Luke 3:15-22

‘While Jesus was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit came down upon Him in bodily form like a dove.’ (Luke 3:21-22)

I would like to begin this morning rather differently than I might normally do and ask you to allow your imagination to take you into this morning's reading as we reflect on its significance and relevance in our own context in 21st century Britain. First of all let me ask you to consider what images are conjured up for you by four phrases that all come from this morning's passage from Luke's Gospel.

At the very beginning of the passage we read it says that 'people's hopes began to rise.' In the context of the Gospel narrative what is being referred to is the ministry of John the Baptist and the feeling that was somehow in the air at the time amongst the people of Israel that the Messiah was about to come. John the Baptist, a strange character by any standards, was preaching in the wilds and although he was preaching an uncompromising message of repentance crowds were flocking to him to be baptised in the River Jordan as a sign of their heartfelt desire to return to the Lord and to walk in His ways. Sometimes in society there is a movement, a groundswell of opinion that moves a whole nation unstoppably in a particular direction.

The 'gilets jaunes' in France might be said to represent such a groundswell of opinion, or the movement that led to the election of Donald Trump in the United States or the campaign that resulted in the decision of the UK to leave the European Union. I'm not entering in to the rights and wrongs of where we are as a country at the moment but whatever your politics (and I expect that there are people with a whole spectrum of views here this morning) there is a lot resting on the next few days and weeks. People's hopes begin to rise – for many who voted to leave the EU there is the hope that one way or another the 29th March will bring a conclusion to long-awaited liberation, for those who see the current parliamentary stalemate as a dead-end there is the hope that the country as a whole may go back to the ballot box, for many others there is simply the hope that in these days there will be an end to interminable uncertainty. What do you think? Are people's hopes rising at this time?

Or here's another phrase from our reading for you to ponder. 'Heaven was opened.' What does that look like to you, I wonder? As I said last week, the season of Christmas is now behind us and we have entered in to the season of Epiphany when the focus is on the revelation of Christ to the world. Last Sunday we thought about the unlikely visitors from afar who recognised Jesus as King from their astrological charts while the leaders of the covenant people of God expressed either disinterest (in the case of the chief priests and teachers of the law) or a determination to kill the child (in the case of King Herod). Here at the baptism of Jesus, heaven is opened and Jesus is proclaimed by a voice from heaven to be God's own beloved Son. So if heaven were to be opened to you right now, what would you be looking for? What revelation would you be seeking? Of course, it is entirely possible that heaven has been opened to us before or is open to us right now but that we have missed what God is trying to show us. Perhaps, like King Herod and the Jewish leaders, we are blinded by our own preconceptions or deafened by the noise around and within us. Heaven is open to us but our eyes are tight shut.

Thirdly, let me point you to another phrase, possibly quite familiar to most of us from the account of Jesus' baptism: "The Holy Spirit came down upon Him in bodily form like a dove." What do you make of that? Most people are probably genuinely moved whenever doves are released – gentle, graceful, peaceful – but perhaps our familiarity with the image means that we take it for granted. Yes, the Holy Spirit looks like a dove – He is peaceful and gentle, so perhaps subconsciously we are left thinking that He is harmless. Interestingly, the account of the baptism of Jesus is the first and only time in the whole of the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit is described in this way. The dove is not, as many might assume, a long-standing, Old Testament image for the Spirit of God, although perhaps we are apt to assume the description of the Holy Spirit *hovering* over the waters in the beginning of creation is reminiscent of a bird at least (and why not a dove?) But actually a cooing, fluttering dove probably doesn't quite cut it when you are talking about the big-bang beginning of the universe. Significantly, though, all four of the Gospels describe the coming of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove upon Jesus when He was baptised, and that is why, no doubt, the Christian Church has taken up that image and used it over the last 2000 years.

Less popular, however, is the image of the Holy Spirit as fire, which is also referred to in this morning's reading. John the Baptist points forward to the Messiah who will not baptise with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire. Maybe we are more comfortable with the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters of baptism than we are with the idea of the refiner's fire or the chaff produced in the winnowing of grain being consumed in a fire than never goes out. Yet on the day of Pentecost it is tongues of fire that settle upon the disciples as the gift of the Spirit is given and it is with fiery zeal (not the gentle dove) that the apostles are anointed to proclaim the Gospel that engulfs the whole Roman Empire within a few decades. When we pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit' what is it that we are genuinely asking for and what is it that we are expecting God to do in response to our cries?

Just as John the Baptist comes to prepare the way for Jesus in his day so we are called to fulfil the same task in our time, which is why I would like you to translate these images (and particularly those of the dove and the fire) from the pages of this morning's reading into our own context so that under God we might fulfil the role today that John did then, that spiritual hope may rise in our time and that heaven may be opened to those who are seeking in our day.

John the Baptist is a truly fascinating character – in some respects I would say he is my New Testament hero – and a Bible study of the passages in which he appears certainly pays dividends. In what we read here we find a deeply humble man – a dove you might say – for whom pointing to the coming Christ is everything. People were wondering whether *he* might be the coming Christ but he points to the water with which he is associated and says, 'I baptise you with water but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie His sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.' (v.16) Elsewhere he says of Christ: 'He must become greater, I must become less.' (John 3:30) But we also see fire. He preaches about the judgement of God and the crowds flock, repentant, seeking baptism at his hands. He does not fear to speak a rebuke to the king who has cast his own wife aside and forced his brother to divorce *his* wife so that he could have her instead. For this, of course, John will ultimately pay with imprisonment and finally his life, but he does not hold back from speaking the truth. And while we might be tempted to categorise some of the message he brought as bad news, Luke has a very

different take on it: 'John preach the Good News to the people and urged them to change their ways.' (v.18)

What about us? When we ask that heaven be opened and for the Holy Spirit to come upon us, is it not with a view to our enjoying comfort and blessing rather than to our being humbled like doves that we might exalt the Lord Jesus or to our being fired with zeal that we might call others to repentance? When we preach and share the Gospel message do we not often shy away from the uncomfortable strands of that message for fear of upsetting people and putting them off. Perhaps John the Baptist has more to teach us than we think and perhaps it is time for us to step out of our comfort zone, to prepare the way of the Lord and to call others to come with us and see what God is doing.

I think it is entirely possible that in the midst of all the political confusion and social unrest that has been shaking our country not just over Brexit but before that over the independence referendum and before than over the credit crunch and the ongoing austerity that flowed from it, hope is rising. There is a deep longing in our society for something better and people are looking for it in all kinds of directions but on the whole not finding satisfaction. It is our task as followers of Jesus in our day to point beyond the here and now, beyond the human solutions which people are running after and being continually disappointed by. While Jesus was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down upon Him in bodily form like a dove. When heaven is opened and when the Holy Spirit comes down, don't let us forget, sometimes that involves fire.

Let us pray for our nation at this time, pray for our community, pray for our families and our neighbours, pray for those who have lost their way. Let us pray that by our words and by our actions Jesus Christ may be revealed afresh in our time – it is not the church that we need to promote but the King and Head of the Church. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will come, that there will be a fruitful harvest for the Kingdom and that everything that is evil and unjust will perish and be destroyed. Pray that the dove will hover and that there may be light and new life. Pray that the refiner's fire will fall and that there will be cleansing and purity.

What will happen when we pray? I don't know – that is for God to determine not us. But 'While Jesus was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit came down upon Him in bodily form like a dove.'