

God's Missionary Spirit (Acts 8:4-17)

10:00am Holy Communion – 12th January 2025

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke (3:15-17, 21-22)

Glory to you O Lord

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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.'

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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.'

This is the gospel of the Lord

Praise to you O Christ

On Wednesday I'll be hosting a school service with the theme of *'using our talents to serve'*. The way I've set it out for the children is that we are all different, we all have a *personality type*. Across the whole school, and therefore across the world, we shall have all the talents we need. **Yet, there are some remarkable people who stand out. I can then bring in the example of Jesus.**

Today is known in our Christian calendar as the Baptism of Christ, but immediately I need to tell you to put aside the picture of a baby. We are now leaping ahead to the time of John the Baptist, with Jesus the man coming to the waters of the River Jordan – it's that baptism. Recall how John had preached a new message of imminent change: *God is going to act, God is on a mission, get ready, in fact repent - realign your lives to what God is doing.*

This attracted quite a bit of attention. Certainly, some of God's authority rested upon John. Was John the Messiah? No, he says, *'but one much greater than I is coming'*. **He will be a remarkable person, by him and through him we shall see God.** That clarity is what Epiphany is all about. Seeing what God is doing, seeing his *revelation*. This is the season to be finding out more about God, to seek to discover his ways and what He is working now with us here by the Church in Haslemere and on Earth. For these next weeks, when you look at the readings set for Sundays, the question we must ask ourselves is: *'what are we being told about the personality type of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit'*. If you are inclined to read scripture each day, then hold that question in those quiet times yourself.

What I want us to learn about God today is that he is a *missionary*. Now just imagine that talent. Does your mind picture an intrepid person who goes to establish the faith in other places? If so, good, we can work with that. But first let's identify what God's missionary personality rules out.

He is not the God of state or culture. We have all heard of the Greek or Roman Gods - the Old Testament is replete with the false Gods of Canaanites, Assyrians and Babylonians. There were lots of them, and they were all different (war, harvest, etc). Such Gods were localised and of a particular purpose, bound into those particular people and giving them discrete identity. If that was us, we would be speaking of a British God, but we never speak like that.

Our biblical history has it that God chose his people through the original covenant with Abraham. A big part of that was his promise for them to be a blessing on all the nations. **That's God's mission embodied in people.** The greatest Jewish prayer is the Shema, which opens with the line '*Praised are you, Lord our God, King of the universe.*' If and when we populate the Moon, or Mars, then God will be worshipped there too, and beyond. Just imagine that, but please, nothing to do with Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk! We take it for granted that God is *universal*, potential and probable in all things and for all people. **We only know God in full mission: anywhere, anytime, blowing wherever he wishes.**

This is where we need to bring in the idea of *calling*.

Missionaries are not entrepreneurs. God is not a product that we try to convince people they need. The missionary zeal of the church is where we try to see what God is *already* doing around us, and where he calls us to now get involved in his plan.

That is talent spotting. **God is always ahead of us; we are only ever called to where that is. If we look, discover and align to his purposes, then we shall be in team with God and that is a powerful and confident place to be, even when it seems so hard.**

That reminds us of the early church in the Book of Acts, part of which we have set for us today in our first reading. Here is where the church began to realise it's missionary personality.

In its earliest days the Church was rejected, persecuted and pursued unto death. It was a deadly time, and it might have all ended there and then. But at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended onto that first Church, broke the borders of fear, and sent the message out into the streets and marketplaces. Yet no sooner had the apostles begun to speak of Christ risen and ascended, than they were seen by the establishment as blasphemers, heretics and apostates against the normality of things. As they crucified Christ, so they stoned the disciples too. But oh, what an effect that would have!

Acts, chapters 7 and 8 tell the explosive story. St Stephen, the first martyr, was killed because of his strident proclamations. From then on, the apostles were scattered like sparks outwards, well beyond the borders of the homelands of God's people, which they originally thought they were sent to bring the message of Christ to.

[Acts 8:1 - 'That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.'](#)

Philip the disciple was one of those who ejected from Jerusalem, going himself north into the area of Samaria, to the place of the Samaritans. [‘He down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them.’](#)and whole thing went pop, God did great things there through Philip.

And here is an important point. These things did not happen because of Philip, even if he was a great talented speaker, exploiting an opportunity. This outpouring was not the result of a great sales campaign of the Christian faith, into new markets. God had already determined his Holy Spirit as a missionary wind blowing outwards. God was ahead there in Samaria already; it was not being taken by Philip like some product. **Philip was led to Samaria to align to God purposes there, to be a common man speaking the common language, so that those people could see and hear the embodiment of faith in Christ, in one person not much different from them.**

[‘The crowds listened eagerly to Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.’](#)

Word got back to the others in Jerusalem, probably now laying-low and wondering what on Earth they were supposed to be doing next. The answer would come from the news of what had occurred in Samaria.

[Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit \(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus\). Then](#)

Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

That was when the apostles came to see that God's mission was not limited to the renewal of Abraham's covenant people: 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' Nothing would ever be quite the same again.

I was reminded of the quotation (although I can't remember who said it) that: '*The church lives in perpetual defeat but always outlives its conquerors.*' It's true, but there is some dangerous complacency in that. The mission of God is insatiable, even the Church of England can't stop it. **It could be said that the Church of England is under attack now.** I'm surprised that Elon Musk hasn't had a go at us yet. Has he?

God's Holy Spirit still goes ahead, with energy. God is never held up by people, organisations and their woes. John Simpson: '*The CofE may have its troubles at the top, but at the sharp end things seem to be thriving. The church I went to this morning was standing-room only, and everyone, and everyone belted out the hymns with gusto. Friends tell me the same from their Christmas services.*' **Did we look like that? Yes! Is there spirit here? Yes! Does mission happen here? Does God call us here? Are we responding? Yes!** It's not just Christmas, you know.

I think it's going to be a difficult year for the Church of England, but I think it can be a great year here in Haslemere Parish. **The closer we can be to God's mission, the more we shall thrive by His glorious Name.** Let that be our personality type.

Amen