

Sermon by Father Roger Walker, St Botolph's Church Worthing
Baptism of Christ, Luke 3 v15-17, 21-22

We have two parts to our Gospel reading this morning - the first is what you might call John the Baptist's Hellfire and Damnation sermon, and the second is the Baptism of Jesus, and both show us that God has expectations of us and we have seen these in recent weeks with our concentration upon repentance: that is, turning around and going another way, and holiness: being set apart from for the service of God. This, says John the Baptist, Jesus will be looking for. He will give us the choice of being baptised in the Holy Spirit when we walk in repentance and holiness, or being baptised with fire when - if we refuse these two ways, we will be burned like the waste chaff at the end of threshing after the harvest: definitely hellfire and damnation stuff and it should encourage us to be like the wheat gathered into the barn. That is, the faithful holy souls whom Jesus will gather into his Kingdom.

John the Baptist is once again asking those listening to him to look at their lives and see if they are what God wants them to be. Once more the same challenge that we had through Advent is laid before us – just in case we had slipped a bit over Christmas. All of this sounds rather frightening, but God does not want us to end his Kingdom because of fear. Rather, in the second part of our reading as he speaks to Jesus, he is also speaking to us. As the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus at his baptism, so the voice of God saying “You are my Son whom I love. With you I am well pleased”. That's rather more encouraging than “you are chaff to be burned by unquenchable fire!

But the question may run through our minds: why is God well pleased with Jesus? He hasn't done anything yet, except come to see John by the River Jordan. It is however the fact that Jesus has come that caused God's pleasure in him. Jesus has chosen to take the first step on the hard way that will lead him through rejection and suffering to death on the Cross. He knew who he was. He knew the prophecies about himself in the Old Testament and there must have been part of Jesus that wanted to stay in the predictability of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth and in the bosom of his family. But he left that behind and he came to the Jordan and God acknowledges him as his Son, tells him of his love for him and pleasure in him.

Now, as Christians we have made the decision to turn our backs on faithlessness and worldliness - we want to be the wheat in Jesus' barn. We know that by baptism we were made God's children by adoption and Grace. We know that God has unconditional love for us: the Bible tells us this in John Chapter 3 verse 16 “God so loved the world that he gave his son Jesus to be our saviour.” What is needed for God to say to us as he did to Jesus “with you I am well pleased”? Or, as Jesus puts it in his parable of the Talents, “well done, good and faithful servant – enter into the joy of your Lord” and the answer to what God wants is contained in two key words from the parable – faithful and good.

If we go back to John 3 v16 and to God's love for us we see that the response he wants to his love for us is for us is to believe in Jesus - to have faith in Him.

This, we are told, is what brings us to eternal life but we cannot just believe with our minds and not let this faith show in our lives. This is where good comes in. We could define this in all sorts of ways but probably the most telling is in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats which immediately follows the parable of the talents and is another parable of judgement. Those whom Jesus chooses to enter His Kingdom -the sheep – are told "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me." The immediate response to Jesus is "when did we do this for you?" The reply is – whatever you did for one of the least of these, my brothers, you did for me. And of course the goats, those consigned to eternal punishment, had not done this. Jesus is saying – as St James did in his powerful epistle - that faith that is not shown in good and loving deeds is dead.

We've made quite a journey today haven't we - from the hellfire sermon to faith and love. The baptism of Jesus shows us that central to it all is God's love for us and our response to that love. Reject it and you are in danger of hellfire. Accept it and God's son welcomes you into his Kingdom.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

10.1.16