

Walking in the Spirit Michael Ogilby Sunday 7th January 2024

Welcome to the first Sunday of a New Year! I hope that you have all had a very happy Christmas and that you have a peaceful and richly blessed New Year. It is strange to be getting back into the normal routines of life, and I know that I have had difficulty in trying to figure out what day of the week we have been on. Some things continue from one year into the next, however, and there is always some pressure in the run up to the 1st of January to make some New Year Resolutions. I'm not going to ask how many of you have made resolutions, and I'm not going to ask how many of those resolutions are still ongoing!

One thing that many people start out on with great gusto is reading through the Bible, starting from the 1st of January. It's a great thing to do, and there are lots of different aids available to help make sure you complete everything, particularly online bible apps like You Version. I have managed to complete this on several occasions, but I have to say that I have also managed to get myself bogged down in the likes of Lamentations and quietly fall off the wagon. The lectionary readings for today do, however, start us off in that line – we are reading the start of Genesis and the start of Mark's Gospel.

Over Christmas I was scrolling through Facebook, and one of those time-wasting posts popped up. It was asking people to comment with the opening line of a book which they thought was the greatest of all time. There were a lot of quotes from the Hobbit, Tale of two cities, Jane Austen etc, once upon a time was popular, but one kept coming round again and again. It is, of course "In the beginning".

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. What an incredible statement, and what a huge amount to unpack.

From that one sentence we can see that God was there before the beginning, we learn that He created everything – all that is, seen and unseen – and we get a sense of how little effort that cost him.

The Earth, in the beginning, was formless, empty and dark. It was not compatible with life, there was nothing to sustain life, yet the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. God's Holy Spirit was intimately involved in every aspect of creation.

I am a self-confessed geek, and I love anything that relates to science. I love to learn how things are put together, how the complexities of physics, chemistry and biology all interact and allow us to see the incredible universe which has been created for us. It is mind boggling to think of the scale of the universe. Our "little" galaxy is approximately 100,000 light years across. It is estimated that there are between 200 billion and 2 trillion galaxies in the observable universe. God created all of that in a day. Then, before He started the work of the second day, he shone light into the universe he had created.

Where do we go, then with our Gospel reading? What is happening at the start of the book of Mark?

We have obviously jumped far forward in time, God has completed creation, Mankind has fallen, sin and death have entered the world. The Hebrew people he chose have turned away from him on many occasions and at this point in history they are oppressed by Roman occupation. They are not far from being slaves, and although they lived in their own country their freedoms were severely curtailed.

We enter the story where John the Baptist has been preaching that the people need to repent and return to worship of the true God. They are living in a spiritual darkness; they are far from walking beside God in an honest and upright manner. In many ways they are surrounded by a darkness of sin, unbelief, and unrepentance. Those who were lauded as being most holy were the Pharisees, those who observed all the detailed instructions of the law, but who ignored the commands God gave them to love those who were poor, weak, ill, and alone.

John was a peculiar character; he lived in the desert, he ate locusts and wild honey and wore a camel hair clothes. Remarkably his hard-line message – repent, turn away from your wickedness – was having an enormous impact. People were flocking to him from the countryside and from the city, determined to hear what he was saying to them. John baptised them with water.

We have had ample demonstration of the power of water over the last number of weeks. I do not ever remember having such intense rain over such a lengthy period, and the rivers flowing down our roads and causing so much damage to people's houses highlight how powerful that can be. The Holy Spirit in Genesis is a great deal more powerful than the water he hovers over – the water is an immense force, but it pales into insignificance compared to the God who can create a universe with a word.

John, in the same way, is a powerhouse. Jesus himself said in Matthew 11:11 that John the Baptist was the greatest of those born of women. His baptism was water, and it was designed to signpost people to something far greater. He is preparing the way for Jesus, for the one who is so much greater than John. In the same way the Baptism offered by Jesus is infinitely more powerful than John's baptism.

Why would Jesus submit to this? Jesus was fully God, incarnate as a human being. John himself queried it in Matthew 3 saying "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus told him it was important, and John baptised him. Jesus was our model in every way - recently we sang "Christian children all must be, mild obedient, good as he". Jesus was showing us the importance of having the all-powerful Spirit indwelling and empowering us. We need to have God working in every aspect of our lives. He also showed the importance of submission - if Jesus, the second person of the Trinity shows obedience to God, how much more should we?

Water and the Spirit are mentioned together again in John 3." Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, they cannot enter the kingdom of God".

God has created us; in the same way he created the primordial earth with the raging seas. We are part of the physical universe. Just as the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters way back in the beginning, He is hovering today around people. God has not just made us, He loves us. His Spirit is anxiously waiting to fill us, to bring us to Him. That takes a step of obedience. In the same way that Jesus went into the river Jordan, we need to take a step of faith. We need to open ourselves to the Spirit. For some that may be for the very first time, repenting and asking for cleansing through Christ's sacrifice. For others it may be after many years of life as Christian, with continual rededication to follow Him.

I know that in my own life I far too often mess up and must come back to God, to ask for forgiveness and restoration.

This new year there can be no better resolution than to walk in a fresh way with God, to pray that he will take each of us, insignificant parts of his creation, and elevate us to something so much greater through the work of his Holy Spirit in our lives.