

SERMON – 10 JANUARY 2016

Reading: Isaiah, chapter 43, vv 1 –7
Luke, chapter 3, vv 15 – 17 & 21 - 22

WATER. WE HAVE SEEN A LOT OF FLOODING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM RECENTLY. EVEN THIS WEEKEND, THERE ARE STILL YELLOW “BE AWARE” WEATHER WARNINGS OUT FROM THE MET OFFICE FOR FLOODING IN CERTAIN AREAS HERE IN SCOTLAND. WATER CAN CAUSE LOTS OF DAMAGE AND HUGE DEVASTATION. AND STILL THE RAIN IS FALLING....ON THE NEWS WE’VE SEEN IMAGES OF MAIN STREETS TURNED INTO STRONG-FLOWING RIVERS, WE’VE SEEN ENTIRE ROADS WASHED AWAY, RAILROAD TRACKS DISAPPEAR, STATIC CARAVANS BROKEN INTO PIECES AND CARS FLOATING AWAYS LIKE DINKY TOYS. IN GENERAL, THE PEOPLE’S REACTION TO THIS IS: “IT’S FRIGHTENING. IT HAPPENED SO QUICKLY. WE ARE DEVASTATED.” WATER IS A DEFINITELY A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH.

FIRE. DURING THE SAME TIME, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD, IN AUSTRALIA, THERE ARE HUGE, DEVASTATING FIRES. YESTERDAY IT WAS REPORTED IN THE NEWS THAT THE FIRES, SPARKED BY LIGHTNING, HAVE BURNT MORE THAN 58,000 HECTARES OF LAND. COMPLETE DESTRUCTION. PEOPLE HAD TO FLEE THEIR HOMES WITH JUST THE CLOTHES ON THEIR BODIES, BECAUSE THE WIND WAS VERY STRONG AND THE FIRE MOVED QUICKLY, CAUSING DEVASTATION EVERYWHERE. AND YOU KNOW, WHEN I WAS WATCHING ALL OF THIS ON THE NEWS, AND IN THE SAME BULLETIN HEARD ABOUT TERRORIST ATTACKS, THE WAR RAGING IN SYRIA, SEEING THOUSANDS OF REFUGEES LOOKING FOR A HOME SOMEWHERE, I COULDN’T HELP BUT WONDER: WHAT IS BECOMING OF THE WORLD? IS THIS WHAT THE END LOOKS LIKE? BUT IT’S NOT. BECAUSE IN ISAIAH, A BOOK THAT WAS WRITTEN IN THE 6TH CENTURY BEFORE CHRIST, WE JUST READ THE FOLLOWING:

“BUT NOW, THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SAYS –
HE WHO CREATED YOU, JACOB,

HE WHO FORMED YOU, ISRAEL:
'DO NOT FEAR, FOR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU;
I HAVE SUMMONED YOU BY NAME; YOU ARE MINE.
²WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE *WATERS*,
I WILL BE WITH YOU;
AND WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE *RIVERS*,
THEY WILL NOT SWEEP OVER YOU.
WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH THE *FIRE*,
YOU WILL NOT BE BURNED;
THE *FLAMES* WILL NOT SET YOU ABLAZE.
³FOR I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD,
THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL, YOUR SAVIOUR..."

WATER AND FIRE HAVE BEEN CAUSING DEVASTATION FOR *FOREVER*. EVEN ALL THOSE YEARS AGO, WHEN THE PROPHET ISAIAH LIVED, PEOPLE WERE SCARED OF WATER AND FIRE.

THE ISRAELITES WERE IN EXILE, LONGING TO BE BACK IN THEIR HOME COUNTRY. IT WAS AS IF THEY WERE LIVING THEIR WORST NIGHTMARE, BUT ISAIAH CONSOLES THEM BY TELLING THEM THAT GOD SAYS THERE WILL BE FLOODS, THERE WILL BE FIRES, BUT THEY WILL NOT DESTROY HIS CHILDREN. IN THE CHAOS, HE WILL BE WITH THEM. HE CALLED THEM BY NAME, THEY BELONG TO HIM, AND HE WILL TAKE CARE OF THEM.

AND IN OUR SECOND READING THIS MORNING, WE SAW THAT THOSE WERE NOT ONLY EMPTY WORDS. BECAUSE GOD SENT HIS SON TO COME CLOSE TO US, TO BECOME ONE OF US ACTUALLY, AND ONCE AGAIN WE SEE THE REFERENCE TO WATER AND FIRE.

JOHN BAPTISED WITH WATER, JESUS BAPTISED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, WITH FIRE. IN JESUS, GOD CAME SO CLOSE TO HIS PEOPLE THAT THE 2 THINGS THAT SCARED THEM MOST, GOT A POSITIVE CONNOTATION WHEN CONNECTED TO JESUS.

Because that same water that can destroy a whole village, became a symbol of washing our sins away. And that same fire, that can

burn a whole town to ashes, became a symbol of God's presence with his people through his Spirit.

John the Baptist invited people to repent, to turn their lives around, to get baptised to get all their sins washed away. Although Jesus did not have any sins His baptism becomes the sign of the new relationship God entered with humanity.

God came close to us by sending Jesus to earth. In and through his Holy Spirit He is with us, in this world we are living in, with all the chaos and problems we have. And He promised that He will *stay* near us, through his Spirit, no matter what happens – as long as we have faith.

Believing in God doesn't mean that we will never have to face floodwaters or fire, but it means that we won't have to face it alone. God is like our life jacket, our fire blanket. He protects us. He makes sure that our circumstances never get the better of us.

Saying this makes me think of something that happened to us when we were on holiday in Corfu last year. One day we went on a boat trip to Paxi and Antipaxi, 2 small islands in the middle of nowhere, with the most beautiful white beaches, clear turquoise water... breathtakingly beautiful. Scenery I've only seen on telly before – usually in shots where people go out on the ocean in a yacht, where beautiful woman sunbathe in their bikinis and attractive men stand around or steer the boat. Every so often someone would gracefully dive into the water for a swim in the ocean. So serene.

Well, that is NOT us! We are usually the ones sitting somewhere in the shade with a book in our hands. But our boat stopped about 50 metres from the beach and people jumped overboard for a swim in the lovely waters – and although it's not our thing – because swimming in the Ionian Sea is probably one of those “once in a lifetime” opportunities that you just have to do it when it happens.

But looking off the side of the boat, the ocean looked really far away. And we were panicking, because what do you do if you get tired of swimming? There is nowhere to hold on to, the water is way too deep to stand in. You could see all the way to the bottom, and it looked FAR away...

When the captain of the boat saw us standing there, debating whether or not to take the risk, he offered us life jackets for the boys. It was a brilliant idea! But I told him I wanted one too. Reluctantly he handed me one. All of a sudden, with the security of the life jacket, I felt more confident to jump off the boat into the sea. Of course, I was the only adult there with a life jacket on!!

And we couldn't help giggling about this afterwards, because what we didn't know was that the water was very salty and dense, so it was very easy to stay afloat. And it turned out that there was a ladder down at the other side of the boat, so this whole experience didn't have to be scary at all!!

But this just reinforces what I was trying to say about God being with us in life. It can be very scary out there in the deep waters, but with the life jacket on, I was, all of a sudden, very brave, because I knew that if I got into trouble, or even if I just got tired, the life jacket would keep me afloat and I would not drown.

God is with us every single day of our lives. He is always looking out for us, keeping us safe against the floodwaters and fires of this world.

So if you feel as if the tears you cry every day are becoming like a river that is going to sweep you away, just reach out to God, and feel the safety of the life jacket of his love around your body.

If you feel as if the questions and worries you have about your life and about the things that are happening to you or your loved ones are burning a hole through your heart, just reach out to God and experience how the fire blanket of his love puts out that fire before it destroys you.

God loves YOU. And me. He loves every single one of us very much. That's why he sent Jesus to come and save us. That's why he sent his Spirit to stay with us.

And remember – that same water that can cause so much destruction is something we can't live without. We need water to drink, to wash, to let the crops grow.

And although fire can burn things to the ground, we need fire to make something beautiful out of a piece of gold. Sometimes the

fires are there not to destroy us, but to form us, to shape us, to change us into the people God wants us to be.

No matter what we see on the news each night, all the chaos and destruction and bad things that are going on in the world out there, we shouldn't despair, because the good news of Jesus Christ – although it is **SADLY** not reported daily – places all these bad things into perspective. God is here with us, and he will help us to cope.

So let us jump into each and every opportunity this new year brings to show the world that because of our faith in Jesus Christ that the waters of life will not sweep over us and the fire of hatred, anger and negativity will not destroy us...

Amen