

Dear Friends,

I am back at my desk writing letters after taking a break over the Christmas and New Year period. So first may I take the opportunity to wish you many blessings for the year ahead, although I guess we cannot escape from the sobering truth of lockdown 3 and a new strain of Covid-19 making an appearance. That said I hope that we can hold onto hope through all of this. There is hope as a vaccine is being rolled out, and the strange liminal threshold kind of hope that a new year always brings, with a chance to both look back and to look forward and to reflect.

So, taking a look back at the last year we may want to note that somehow we have come through many difficulties and frustrations, as we enter into a third lockdown due to the virus, we must reflect that we have already come through two periods of lockdown and survived. We have found ourselves to be resilient in all sorts of ways, some of us reaching out to friends regularly by phone, caring for neighbours, applauding carers and other key workers, some people have taken up new hobbies, while others have offered time collecting for foodbanks and helping their communities in other ways.

This does not of course mean that the last year has not been very difficult, the NHS came under enormous pressure, many people fell ill and many died due to a virus that shocked and surprised us in many ways. Poverty and unemployment both rose, and businesses struggled to survive, with even some big high street names floundering and failing. Uncertainty has also reigned, with pubs, restaurants, gyms and other services like hairdressers closing then opening, then closing again, it has been the same with our churches, and while we are technically allowed to open the Sheffield Circuit have strongly advised the local trustees to close the buildings for public worship at this time.

Looking forward, as we move through the depths of winter and the dark days that it brings, can we reach out for hope, praying that the roll out of the vaccine will be unhindered, praying that everyone will follow the government guidelines for the sake of one another. We can be hope in the way that we act and behave, and while that is all still very strange to us in the long run it will be worth it.

But what does hope look like? I wonder if we turn to this weeks Gospel account to find it? In a time of oppression and occupation by Rome bringing with it harsh punishments and heavy taxation, the people of Israel longed for a Messiah, it was into this climate that John the Baptist came, the voice crying out in the wilderness, calling people to new ways of living and pointing forward to the coming of the Messiah:

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

⁷⁻⁸As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."

⁹⁻¹¹At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." (Mark 1: 4-11)

His baptism will change you from the inside out, the work of the Holy Spirit will be with you and in you. This hope is available to us today every time we choose to turn to God, admit our need and receive not only the gift of grace in forgiveness, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit to be that living hope within us.

How we need that in these days, days when we are dealing with so much change, news that can be difficult to absorb, and for many of us prolonged separation from our loved ones. We can seek hope within, the work of the divine comforter, equipper and empowerer. When we don't know where to turn we can turn to prayer, if it is as simple as saying help.

There is a wonderful prayer in the Wee Worship book from the Iona Community that simply says this:

In you gracious God, the widowed find a carer, the orphaned find a parent, the fearful find a friend.

In you, the wounded find a healer, the penitent find a pardoner, the burdened find a counsellor.

In you the miserly find a beggar, the despondent find a laughter maker, the legalists find a rule breaker.

In you Jesus Christ, we meet our maker, and out match.

And if some need to say "Help me", and if some need to say "Save me", and if some need to say "Hold me" and if some need to say "Forgive me", then let these be said now in confidence by us.

Amen

I encourage you to take a moment to think about what it is that you need, what it is that you need in order that you might live out living hope and bless others, and to pray for that now, in confidence that your prayer will be answered.

I leave you with the words of a hymn:

*Holy Spirit, we welcome you
Holy Spirit, we welcome you*

*Move amongst us with holy fire
as we lay aside all earthly desire
hands reach out and hearts aspire
holy spirit, holy spirit, holy spirit, we welcome you*

*Holy Spirit, we welcome you
Holy Spirit, we welcome you*

*Let the breeze of your presence blow,
that your children here might truly know
how to move in the spirit's flow.
holy spirit, holy spirit, holy spirit, we welcome you*

*Please accomplish in me today
some new work of loving grace i pray
unreservedly have your way
Holy Spirit Holy Spirit Holy Spirit we welcome you*

May you know the deep blessing of hope in Christ. As always if anyone would like to talk please don't hesitate to call. You remain in my prayers.