

St Brandon's 5 Dec 2021

Philippians 1: 3-11

Luke 3: 1-6

In the 13th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, when Lyndon B Johnson was president of the United States, Harold Wilson was prime minister of the United Kingdom and Alf Ramsey manager of the England football team, a word of confidence came to a young East End lad named Bobby telling him,
'You can win the World Cup!'

We don't tend to use that kind of language when we write our history today... but in Luke's day it standard practice.

The background to today's gospel is political turmoil: between the Emperor Tiberius, Pilate, local governor in Judea; the Jewish high priests Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas, and the three sons of Herod the Great (murderer of the innocents), who'd shared out his kingdom between them and still could not agree.

The event Luke recounts takes place in a world of power struggles, conflicting interests, family feuds. And then,

the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness

That phrase links this moment with the call of prophets throughout the Old Testament, for John is the last prophet before Jesus, the one whose task is to prepare God's people for Jesus.

He is, if you like, the human hinge between old and new testaments, standing at the point in salvation history when all that's been promised is fulfilled in Jesus.

We'll think more about John's ministry next week, but today I want to make this one point about him, God has a job for John, a purpose for his life, to prepare the way for Jesus. Thus,

John's life's work is God's work, done in and through him. And as he does it, John becomes the person God always created and intended him to be

John can only do this work when *the word of God* comes to him- he isn't speaking his own words, or making up his own message, but doing God's work, begun in him as a baby and child, brought up lovingly by his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, who both know and love God.

Zechariah prophesies over him as a newborn baby,

'You my child shall be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way...'

God brings John into a home where his parents have the spiritual wisdom and insight to prepare him for God's call.

As an adult, the Holy Spirit guides John into the desert to wait, pray and listen. And then. *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness*

John's life's work is God's work, done in and through him as he becomes the person God always created and intended him to be.

Now lets fast forward about 55 years to Philippi in Northern Greece, where the word of God comes to the church in a letter from the apostle Paul.

Dictated by Paul, in prison in Ephesus, the letter was taken by messenger to Philippi and passed around groups of Christians and read aloud, as we read it aloud just now.

Today's passage follows Paul's formal greeting, then immediately, he tells them he is praying for them, with *thankfulness* and *joy*.

It's *faithful* prayer as he remembers them fondly and holds them in his heart before God.

It's *confident* prayer, not confidence Pauls' in himself, but in God's grace and love.

So in v.7 Paul states *You share in **God's grace** with me*. For Paul, for the Philippian Christians, and for us, following and serving Christ is not about our own strength but **God's grace**- through Jesus' death for us. God's grace will bring courage in times of hardship and challenge, as Paul says: you share in God's grace

Both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

We prove the truth of the gospel through times of trial – in another letter Paul writes that *God's grace is sufficient for him, for God's strength is made perfect in our weakness.*

Thus Paul, from his cell, writes about the spiritual reality of **the grace of God** and secondly, **the love of God**

v.9 this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best

As he passes long hours in prayer, Paul asks God to give these Christians his love, to become the lens through which they view the world. Paul's prayer is confident in God, in God's grace and love.

Now here's the link with John the Baptist- Just as

John's life's work is God's work, done in and through him as he becomes the person God created him to be,

so Paul tells the Philippian Christians,

The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.

God is working in and through them to complete their lives, by the power of his grace and love. They will bear fruit for God, 'a harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ' as Paul puts it, 'for the glory and praise of God'.

The Philippians will grow into the image of Christ as the Holy Spirit brings fruit in their lives. And so we could say of them too,

Their lives' work is God's work, done in and through them.

Those followers of Jesus are becoming the people God created and intended them to be.

And us?

Do we trust in the power of God's grace and love that

The one who began a good work among us will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus?

We may feel our lives haven't amounted to much, we may be acutely aware of loss or regret missed opportunities,

We may experience nostalgia for happier times.

All of this, God knows, and can redeem, by his grace and love. God asks us today to trust in his promise that he has begun a good work in us, from the moment we put our faith in Christ, and he **will** bring it to completion when we go to meet him face to face. We can live today in the light of this promise, praying and working to share God's grace and love with others, every day. *A story to close:*

There was a little girl who lived on the upper floor of an old apartment block. Downstairs lived, a sculptor.

As she went out every morning she would peep round his door. All she could see was a huge slab of stone, and the artist working on it with his tools, chipping away.

Day by day, week by week she walked past and peeped in.

She was fascinated but couldn't pluck up courage to go in.

At last, after months of waiting, she looked round the door one day and saw the sculptor standing, looking at his work.

He was smiling. The little girl tiptoed in. And then she caught her breath at what she saw.

The top of the huge slab was now a head, with ears, a mouth, and eyes... looking straight into hers!

The little girl turned to the sculptor and said

How did you know there was a lion in there?

God, who created and formed us, knows and loves us, wants the best for us. He wants us to become all he created us to be. And it is *his* work, chipping away, knocking off a few rough edges, breaking through the hard rock of bitterness and pain to make us into the people he always knew we would be.

Let us take hold of God's word through Paul, the precious promise that *The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.*

Amen.