

SERMON AT HOLY COMMUNION AT 8.00 AM AT ST AGNES' CHURCH, FRESHWATER BAY AND AT 11.00 AM AT CHRIST CHURCH, TOTLAND BAY ON SUNDAY 18TH FEBRUARY 2018 (1ST SUNDAY OF LENT) BY JAMES COOK

Readings: 1 Peter 3.18-22 and Mark 1.9-15

Title: 'Saved, Strengthened and Sent to Serve

Aim: To help us understand and experience what it means to be saved by God, strengthened by God and sent out by God to serve in his Kingdom.

Three words in this sermon that I suggest we might easily remember are 'Saved, Strengthened and Sent'. We see all three things happening in today's short Gospel reading, and all three can happen in the lives of us, as followers of Jesus. Indeed, I would argue not just that all three things – Saved, Strengthened and Sent – could happen to us but that they should happen to us, if we are to be blessed as God would have us be blessed.

Verses 9 to 11 of Mark 1 describe the baptism of Jesus, telling us who Jesus is and how we are **saved**. Baptism is the sacrament through which we are reminded of (1) our need to be saved, (2) what we are being saved from and (3) what we are being saved for. We are saved from the consequences of the sinful nature that we have inherited,

and we are saved for an eternity to be spent with God our Creator.

In one sense, Jesus does not need to be saved, because he has not inherited a sinful nature, and he already has an eternal relationship with God the Father. On the other hand, however, Jesus needs to be baptised, because he needs to share fully in our human nature in order to redeem it.

The waters of baptism signify, as did the waters of the great flood to Noah and his family, that we have been washed from the stain of sin, that we have been delivered from its destructive power and that we have passed from spiritual death to new spiritual life.

Emerging from baptism into the new life that God has given us, we hear, as Jesus did, the voice of the Father say:

“You are my Son [or Daughter], the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We are not saved by the ritual of baptism, but by what it demonstrates: our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In chapter 3, verse 18 of his first Epistle, Peter describes what happens in these words:

‘For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you

[to bring us] to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.’

This is one of the verses that I was encouraged, as a new Christian, to learn by heart. I would encourage you to do the same.

Yes, we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, but we also need, by God’s grace, to be **strengthened**, as new Christians and throughout our Christian lives. Lent provides us all with an annual opportunity for this to happen. In the season of Lent, we remember and share in the experience of Jesus during the forty days following his baptism.

Jesus spends this time alone with God, deprived of food and creature comforts and tempted by Satan to go back upon his commitment to do things God’s way. By facing and overcoming temptation, Jesus is strengthened to undertake the mission that God the Father has prepared for him and that by virtue of his baptism he has accepted.

As Jesus came out of the water, the Holy Spirit, manifested in the physical form of a dove descended upon him. Thus we are reminded that we are strengthened through the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

The temptations of Jesus, the challenges by which he is strengthened when he overcomes them, are not described in detail by Mark, although Matthew and Luke tell us

more. One writer on this period in Jesus' life imagines the devil saying to Jesus, as he does to us:

“If you are a child of God, shouldn't things be going a little smoother for you? If you are really a Christian, I mean – shouldn't you be happier, healthier, richer, safer?”¹

Is this, I wonder, the question that the misguided preachers of the so-called 'Prosperity Gospel' put their needy and gullible followers?

The author I have just quoted suggests a reply to the temptation of leaving God's path for what seems a more attractive alternative:

“Away with you Satan! I would rather be a hungry child of God than a well-fed player on your team. Now shoo!”²

It is as we face and overcome the temptations to go the devil's way, instead of God's way, that we are strengthened for service. If we need a contemporary equivalent to the wilderness experience, we could think about the Olympic athlete and the various temptations to succeed by unfair and even criminal means.

¹ Brown Taylor, B in 'Bread of Angels' quoted by Ronal W Dale in *Windows on Mark*, Kevin Mayhew, 1999, p86.

² Ibid.

Jesus overcomes temptation, we learn from Matthew and Luke, by knowing and applying Bible teaching in difficult situations. That is what we also need to do and why extra, prayerful study of the Bible and other Christian literature is so important during Lent. There are local opportunities for us to do this individually and in various Lent groups.

To be saved from sin and to be strengthened are not ends in themselves. They have a purpose: the glory of God, which is manifested in his worship and our service to others in his name. We are saved and strengthened by God in order to be **sent** in his service. For most of us, that means being sent within our local community, but clearly some are sent farther away for God's work.

Despite the personal dangers, evidenced by the imprisonment of his cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, Jesus leaves the wilderness and embarks upon his mission. Mark tells us that Jesus goes to his home territory of Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.”

Saved and strengthened, may we be sent, like Jesus to share the good news of God's love, by serving others in his name. We can do this through the sacrificial giving of our time, talents and money. May Lent be for each of us a special time to do this. Amen.