

Beloved

St James, 12th January 2025

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 27

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people
And kindle in us the fire of your love.

Happy New Year! I was debating yesterday how long into January we should keep saying HNY to people, and Sarah suggested as long as it takes to become used to writing the new year date. I thought this was a great idea – until I stumbled into saying 2004 for 2024.

Before realising that we're now in 2025.

At which point all I can say is – doesn't time fly!

But I digress. I wonder how you feel about the prospect of 2025?

Maybe you're full of zip and enthusiasm – can't wait to get fully into the stride of all the opportunities that it might bring? A new venture? A long-awaited holiday? A big family event to look forward to?

Or maybe, in some words I read this week, you want to "get back into bed and hibernate for a few months – fragile, exhausted, and not ready for the ups and downs of another year."
(That was me on Friday morning!)

Or maybe, like most of us, you move daily somewhere between those two extremes. Life's a bit of a roller-coaster. Times when we feel like we're on top of the world. Times when life chugs along. Times when life feels like a long, slow uphill slog. And – let's be honest – times when it feels like the bottom has dropped out of our world and we're in free-fall.

Which why this set of readings this morning are so very appropriate as we get into the nitty-gritty of another year. They remind us, reassure us, bring us face-to-face with the reality that come-what-may – we (each individual one of us) matter. We are seen. We are known. We are safe and secure within the love of God - Father Son and Holy Spirit, and nothing, but nothing, can separate us from that love.

Let's start with God's wonderful words through Isaiah, spoken originally to people in exile. People who were feeling lost, abandoned and forgotten.

Any time you're feeling that way, these words are for you

- "Do not fear"
- "I have called you by name, you are mine." Read that, and know that God is saying that to you. "I have called you by name [name] – you are mine."

- Whatever horrors or fearful things are happening - “I will be with you”

Psalms 27, which we shared together earlier, records King David’s personal experience of this

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

David knows from his own life that God the Father, Maker, Creator is utterly constant and faithful.

And he goes on to speak of living in the Temple – at the time, the dwelling place of God. We have the wonderful privilege of coming to this building to meet with God – and many people speak of the sense of ‘something special’ about coming here. But actually, as followers of Jesus we have the Spirit of God living within us. His presence is with us wherever we are. Each of us is a living, breathing, Holy Spirit temple. How cool is that?

Words – promises – God’s promises – that we can hold on to, whatever we are facing in life.

The story from Acts maybe speaks particularly to us when life is an adventure and full of possibilities. You can maybe imagine the joy of the Samaritans – people who were seeking the one true God but had lost their way – catastrophically according to the Israelites, who regarded them as the lowest of the low.

And yet now, Philip had come to share with them the good news of Jesus drawing all people to himself and back into the relationship with God. Including them. They can know that they are loved by God, included in his promises.

And this is made real for them when they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke doesn’t record exactly what happened, but elsewhere he writes of new believers being filled with joy, overflowing with praise, and speaking out words from God – sometimes in unfamiliar languages. Of a deep realisation of the presence of the living God within them.

And not just of the presence of God, but of his power – the power of love to change people, events, us – to be more in line with his original plan.

And then the story of Jesus’ baptism. What can we take from this?

Well for starters - those wonderful words of reassurance from the Father to Jesus. And by association to us. “You are my...Beloved.”

God pours out all this love on to each one of us. But he doesn’t force us to accept it. It’s our choice.

A very special friend of mine once pointed out that beloved can be read as “be loved”. Sometimes we have to allow ourselves to “be loved” by God. And then we discover that the love of God calls out a response in us, and we too can love in a new way. Love God, love others, love the person God created us to be.

So what might our response look like?

The baptism of Jesus was many things – but at its basic level it was the point at which he began his ministry. The next time we meet Jesus in Luke’s gospel he is undergoing the temptations in the desert.

When we know we are secure in God’s love, we are set free from the things that hold us back. In our own way, a new beginning. Set free for the purpose for which God created us.

As God tells us through the prophet Isaiah
“Do not fear, for I am with you...
everyone who is called by my name
whom I formed and made
Whom I created for my glory.”

Our purpose is to reflect the glory of God’s love into this broken and needy world.

Maybe on Friday last week you looked up into the early night sky and saw the wonderful sight of Venus and the Moon really close to each other, and incredibly bright¹. If you did, you’ll know how stunning it was. If not, the picture gives an idea, but is a pale representation of the splendour.

The point is that the Moon and Venus are both rocks. They have no light of their own. They reflect the glory of the sun, the source of physical light in this small corner of the universe.

We have no light, no glory of our own. John the baptiser ‘got it’ when he pointed the attention away from himself and towards Jesus, who is the glory of God made human.

Our response to God’s love is to receive it for ourselves and then reflect it back out into the world that he has made – in whatever way we can. The closer we are to God, the easier it is to reflect his light. The more we receive his love, the more of ‘who we are and what we have’ we want to offer back to him – not as an obligation, but as a joy. Not in our own strength, but through the power of God’s Holy Spirit living within us.

Bringing the reality of God’s love to all that he has made.

So, as we finish, may you know yourself to be God’s Beloved, and may that knowledge overflow to God’s glory - reflecting God’s love out to this desperately needy world.
In Jesus’ name

¹ <https://www.skyatnightmagazine.com/news/venus-saturn-january-2025>

