

Sunday 5th September 2021
Leviticus 16:1-10 & 29-34
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Holy Spirit, come among us and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Holy Spirit, come among us and reveal to us the heart of God.

Holy Spirit, come among us with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

Can you remember the last time you were at the cinema? Long time ago eh? Probably more than a year ago/ There might be some people, anyone brave enough to have been brave enough to go in the last year? A couple people. Oh, I am impressed!

So, a couple people, but most of us have not been since probably before corona virus. I loved going with my Dad especially, it was one of the things that we did Father and son kind of days, we went to the cinema but if you were to go sometime in the near future when maybe you felt safe enough to do so I wonder what type of film you would go see? Would it be a rom-com? Anybody want to admit to that one? I like a rom-com as much as anybody. An action-based film maybe? Maybe Marvel? There'll be a few of us amongst them. Maybe a film with a bit of suspense or drama, or a film based upon a real life story, maybe that ticks your box.

Well, whatever your preference of film, maybe I would think we only gauge it good if it has a story that grips us in some way, and the very best films tell a story that touch our hearts, they move us in the deepest part of our being, and most often this happens when it tells a story that connects with us. it maybe shows us something that connects with our life even, or maybe in the telling of the story we see our lives in a new light, maybe we ask new questions and the horizon has opened up and we see the world more clearly, or it grips us so much we're moved to action and response. The telling of story through drama can be a very powerful medium and can impact us and open our eyes like very few other things.

Our reading today takes us back into the life, the rituals, the story of Israel, and it can seem pretty irrelevant, weird even, maybe barbaric too, but their story of what God did in them and through them and with them is meant to help us see things differently, it's meant to help us see God differently and to see ourselves differently.

We've just begun a new teaching series, a series to help bring us back to the purposes and values we have as a congregation, and last week we saw that part of our purpose is connected to the heart of God and we saw how that is that God's heart is to have a people of his own God, is seeking for all of us to have relationship with Himself and He seeks to be near us and for us to be near Him. So, God's not interested in mere religion, He's not interested in being a God that we forget about because he's so distant and far off. That's not what God's after. He's not after us just getting on with some religious stuff here on a Sunday morning. God wants to be involved in your life and mine so it's completely fitting that one of our values, one of the ways of working out our purpose is about helping people Meet with God. We want to be a place, a community, we want to be a means by which people can meet with God in a personal and life-changing way. That is what we mean by the value of Meet, it's meeting with God.

Our passage today reminds us of this because the tabernacle, the tent of meeting was a living picture of this reality. God was in the midst of His people, He was surrounded by them, He was near them, He was central to their lives and to everything they did.

Now the tent of meeting had an outer courtyard but then within the tent it also had various parts to it. There was the holy place and there was the most holy place, the holy of holies, and it was in the holy of holies, the most holy place, that God's Ark, the Ark of the Covenant, was there and it was a symbol of God's presence. It was almost like the foot stool of His throne and so the most holy place was the throne room of God Almighty and he presenced Himself among His people because He wanted close, direct relationship with them.

Do you know He still wants that today, with you and with me? Do you know that? Do you really know that? Like, really have your eyes been opened to that reality? Can you see in the story of Israel that God wants to be involved in your life? Do you know He wants to meet with you in a personal in a life-changing way?

Just last Sunday I was chatting to some people on the doorstep after the service and one lady stopped to spend just a few minutes with me because she wanted to share something encouraging. Over the last year she'd started to tune in again to church, she hadn't been interested in church for a while, but she started tuning in at home on a Sunday and mid midweek as well and, lo and behold, God met with her, God spoke to her in ways that are beyond mere coincidence, and it really encouraged me, and it reminded me that God wants to meet with us, with us all, with you and with me, in a personal and life-changing way. Do you know that? Do you know that? But the drama played out in our passage today is also to open our eyes to something else, it's meant to open our eyes to a dilemma, a dilemma, because God's heart, as was said, is to have a people of His own and to be near them, but God is holy and that means He's perfect, He is completely separated from evil, He's truly righteous and good and so that holy God cannot be as close to the people. He yearns to be near and He cannot allow them to come too close to Him for their own safety, either because we, you and I, Israel as well, we're a bunch of broken, messy people. Who amongst us can say we're perfect? We do wrong stuff every day, every week, as part of our nature, there's a darkness inside us. We'd rather not admit it but it's there, and that darkness, the Bible calls sin, and sin to holiness is like oil to water, it doesn't mix, or it's like gas to a naked flame and so it will be consumed by the dynamic, powerful, pure holiness of God if sin comes too close, and that's what we read about,

The start of our passage where the two sons of Aaron had approached the Lord when they weren't supposed to and they died, and it's also why in our passage today there are restriction, after restriction, after restriction, and ritual, after ritual, after ritual to emphasize this issue, to emphasize that this holy God has to keep a safe distance between Himself and His people and so only, the only the high priest could enter, go into the most holy place, only he could go through the curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place, and he could only do that once a year, and he could only do that when he'd offered sufficient sacrifices. Only him, only him. And we're meant

to see the dilemma we all face but which God faces with us too, because His heart is to have a people of His own and to meet with them in a real tangible way but because of sin, there is distance and there is danger.

Now, we might wonder 'Well, why didn't God just continue with this old system, the old system He gave Israel?' Well you have to go into the New Testament to find the answer for that and in one of the New Testament books, The Letter to the Hebrews, the author describes the old system in this way, he says 'This is an illustration for the present time indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper.' What had been before under the old system had kept the relationship between God and His people, it had facilitated forgiveness but it didn't go far enough, didn't clear the conscience, it didn't mean that people could come into God's presence whenever, wherever, it just wasn't possible, there was limitation. There was limitation because the old system was not enough and so as he says it acted as an illustration or picture and drama to help us see the dilemma. A dilemma we all face and which only God could solve and solve what He did through Jesus, because the same author goes on to say 'Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant unlike the other high priest he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people, he sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves but he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood so obtaining eternal redemption.' On the cross Jesus offered himself, he sacrificed himself for us so as to secure our forgiveness and provide a way for us to come back into right relationship with God. He's like the scapegoat in our passage today, the scapegoat. The priest would have laid his hands on the scapegoat and confessed the sins of the nation upon the scapegoat and then the scapegoat carried that sin away as a sign as a reenactment of what God had done and in a similar way, in the words of Paul, God made Jesus, who had no sin, to be sin for us or in the words of Peter 'Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross.' Jesus bore our burden, the burden of our sin, and he bore our sins away, He sacrificed Himself for us to take away the sins of many and clear the conscience of the worshipper, but friends, it's almost like that is just the tip of the iceberg because there's so much more, there's so much more through Jesus, because through Jesus we now have confidence to draw near to God and any of us can have an intimate relationship just like that woman told me last week. Now we don't enter into a sacred place like the most holy place in a temple or a tent, we don't even have to be in a church building for this to happen, as her story told us, because, through faith in Jesus, through relationship with God through Jesus, we can meet with God anywhere, anytime, we can have direct immediate access to God to our Heavenly Father whose heart is for you to know Him, for Him to have a people of His own and to meet them, with them personally and in a life-changing way, and it's all available because of Jesus.

This isn't made up friends, this is not made up, this is not some silly Sunday school story. If this sounds fictional or make-believe it really isn't. He's changed my life. I could point to any number of people and I won't pick on you in here, but I could pick to any number of people and God is working in their lives now, their lives aren't perfect and

their lives are really hard, but God is there, God is there, He is at work, He is changing our lives and He's made that possible because of Jesus.

We're going to be celebrating, this morning the Sacrament of Communion and it's another picture, I might say it's another drama, to help open our eyes and remind us of the heart of God that He loved you and me so much He was willing for His body to be broken, He was willing for His blood to be spilt and that's what we remember through the bread and the wine. We remember this in His sacrifice. God was making a way for His people to draw near and know Him now and for all eternity.

Friends, have your eyes been opened to this reality? Do you see the character of God? Do you see the heart of God? This isn't a God that wants to be kept at arm's length, this isn't a God who's a fable or a made-up story, or who just wants you to be religious on a Sunday morning, He wants to be involved in your life, but for that to happen you need to realize that this is who God is, but you also need to realize you need Him and you need His sacrifice because friends, nothing you do can cover that distance, nothing you do can remove the danger of sin in your life except the blood of Jesus.

So, maybe you're beginning to wonder. I hope you're beginning to wonder how can I share in this scope how can I share in this? How can I benefit from the death of Jesus? Well, Paul reminds us he says 'God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith' to be received by faith, it's all by faith, it's not actually by turning up at church or being baptized or been a good person, none of it counts, none of it counts, it's all by faith, faith in Jesus, and if you want Him to be your Savior, if you want that distance to be removed, if you want God to be involved in your life you have to come to Him in faith and faith in Him alone.

I said last week that I also wanted our teaching series to help us think about sharing our faith too, and we heard last week that Biblical faith must be lived out, it must be seen, it must be known, it must be shared and yes, the sacraments of baptism and communion are two ways of sharing our faith, of making it known and it's lovely that Callum and Emma stood today with Lewis and they made their faith known and they committed themselves along with the God parents to pass on this faith to Lewis, and we rejoice in that but if all the ways of making our faith known simply happen within these walls then the wider world will never know of the heart of God, they'll never know of the depths of God's love and the lengths He went to, they'll never know that there is a love which died for them and for us. Our God is the most captivating, loving being there is, more than your spouse, more than your kids, more than your family or friends, but do you know that? Do you know His love?

Because His heart is to have a people of His own and for them to meet with Him in a personal and life-changing way and He sacrificed Himself to make that possible.

Now, I'm not saying, hear me, I'm not saying you have to go out there and talk to the first person you meet about Jesus, you'll be glad to hear again, and I'm not saying you have to tell them about sins straight away and that we all need forgiveness, I wouldn't

do in the first conversation, and eventually maybe, in this series, we'll think about the how of sharing our faith but I think what God wants for us, in this series especially, is to renew our hearts and renew our minds, more than necessarily equip us in the how of sharing our faith. He wants your heart to be stirred by what He has done, He wants your heart to be stirred by His purposes, He wants your eyes to be opened to see a greater vision of who God is of who God really, really is. He's a God of love and of holiness and He sought for you to be part of His people that you might meet with Him personally even if it meant His own death. I wonder, can we allow these old words, these old stories of Israel, can we allow their story to stir in us such adoration, such wonder, such commitment to God, that it maybe increases our courage and we might step over our fear, and maybe think about sharing our faith? I think that's what God's seeking in this series, to stir in us and do in us, and you've got a choice of whether to allow Him to do that or not, or to shut Him down. The choice is yours and I pray that you will respond to Him so let us pray.

Friends, how do you need to respond today?

Do you need to allow the sacrifice of Jesus to stir your heart afresh?

Do you need to know that you're forgiven and received to the Father, that there's nothing you've done that can keep you from Him?

If you're putting your faith in Jesus, His death can make you clean in His sight and He welcomes you back with open arms.

Do you need to allow these words to rise up in your courage?

What is it you need to do today?

And the stillness, why don't you just the quiet of your thoughts, share that with God. I do wonder, I do wonder if there's some here today, you've come into church this morning, you wouldn't say that you're not a Christian, that this God is just a made-up old story, and I wonder if you felt your heart stirred, or you felt maybe a conviction of your way of life, that there's distance between you and God because of choices you make day by day, and if that's you, maybe today is the day you become a Christian, today is the day you say 'God come into my life and forgive me' and if that's you let me lead you in a prayer just now.

Lord Jesus, repeat after if that's you,

Lord Jesus, please forgive me,
please come into my life.

Thank-you that You died on the cross for me.

Thank-you that You offer me a life with You.

I receive that gift today.

Thank-you Lord Jesus.

Lord, if that's, if someone's prayed that prayer today, I pray that You'd surround them, that You keep them safe, that You'd fill them afresh with Your Spirit and You'd help them to know Your love and to walk with You all the days of their life.

And Lord, whatever it is you've stirred in our hearts, would You, would You seal it over, would You take it deep, Lord, would You stir us up, would You convict us where we

need convicted, when You free us where we need freed, Lord, would You give us hope where we need hope, would You pour out Your love where we need to know that, deep in the depths of our soul, and we pray that for our kids as well Lord, we pray for all the children and young people that are amongst us and through in their groups just now. Lord, reveal to You, reveal to them Your love, astound them with Your love, captivate them with Your love Father that they may follow You all the days of their life and so we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

If you decided to become a Christian today, if you decided to respond and pray that prayer with me, then please get in touch with me, just let me know that you made that choice, you can either tell me on the door, you can drop me an email, because we'd love to journey with you, we'd love to equip you and help you follow Jesus, so do let me know if you did respond. We continue in response to God.