

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 13th January 2019

10am Rev Peter Cornick

... the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

Why might Luke, suggest the Spirit descends on Jesus, in bodily form like a dove.

Doves can be traced back to Iron age temples, in the ancient near east. They were seen to be symbols of fertility.

Does the presence of a dove suggest a new life for Jesus perhaps – a public ministry at baptism, fertile with promise?

In the Old Testament, we find doves used in sacrificial worship. Archaeologists have found dovecots in and around the ancient Temple. In Leviticus 5: 7, we read of turtle doves being brought to the Temple; one as a sin offering, one as a burnt offering.

Jesus, the one who will free people from their sin and guilt?

In Genesis, Noah's dove famously returns to the ark with a sprig of olive. There is life after the death of the flood. The dove becomes a symbol of hope, forgiveness and peace.

And then, doves can symbolise suffering. Isaiah 38: 14 suggests the prophet moaning in suffering, like a dove, due to the oppression of his people.

So even at his baptism, like the myrrh of the wise man, there is a hint of suffering and death.

But the dove also shows God's beauty. In Song of Songs 2: 14, the writer calls out to God, describing God like this:

¹⁴ O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

In Jesus, then, at his baptism, we see God's face.

Fertile with promise; to free people from sin; offering hope, forgiveness and peace; one who will suffer; so that we might see God's face?

The dove which descends upon Jesus represents all these things. And now, becomes the Holy Spirit, descending on Jesus, in bodily form, like a dove.

The bodily form of the dove, sounds to me very physical, fleshly – a sign of God one can reach out for and touch. It was slightly

disappointing to find, that the Greek words behind this 'bodily form' are not so tangible as they appear in English. They suggest the Holy Spirit 'appearing like' a dove – the Holy Spirit being 'dove-like'. Or, are these words actually referring to the descent itself – rather than the Holy Spirit – a descent as intangible and transitory as a vapour trail behind a jet in the sky.

What Luke is doing, is painting a picture of Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit. Of knowing he is beloved of God; chosen; given purpose.

John the Baptist reminds us, that Jesus offers a baptism to us all. One filling us with the Holy Spirit – the presence of God in our lives. But John also notes, the baptism Jesus offers will be a baptism of fire – which might describe a Superintendent's first few months at the West London Mission! Or it might better describe, the way in which the baptism Jesus offers to us all, is one where the fire refines us; the fire of the Holy Spirit refines our characters, our behaviours. Refines us into those disciples which God would desire.

Like the dove of ancient tradition, the baptism we are offered by Jesus, creates in us people fertile with hope in God's presence in the world, even in those situations of suffering, people who are forgiving and peaceable, and remembering, in bread and wine, that the face of God is to be found in Jesus.