

God's provision

Readings: 1 Sam 7:3-14, Matt 6:25-33 & Jude 1-4, 24-25

We have just had the celebration of Christmas Day where we remember God's provision of a Saviour. This was the message that the angels gave the shepherds in the fields, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a **Saviour**, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11). And previously, the angel had said to Joseph, concerning Mary, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for **he will save his people from their sins.**" (Matt. 1:21). This was the great fulfilment of the vision of Jeremiah "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. **For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.**" (Jer. 31:33-34). God had **promised** and God had **provided** in Jesus Christ the complete fulfilment of His saving purposes, not only for the Jews but for the whole world. This is the big story we have at Christmas, God's provision of a Saviour.

We had the big story in miniature in our reading from Samuel. The people of Israel were in dire straits, they were no match for the Philistines when it came to war. They had just had a day of national fasting and repentance and up troop the Philistines ready for battle. The people of Israel needed God's salvation. Samuel cried out for God's help, God answered and the Philistines were routed. So that the people did not forget, Samuel raised a stone, an ebezzer, to remind them of God's provision for them. As Walter Brueggemann noted "Israel must always remember that the victory is a victory given by God. It is not Israel's victory, or even the victory of Samuel." I'm often reminded of that story when I see a sign over a chapel in Wales – Ebenezer Chapel – and think of that phrase "hitherto the Lord has helped us." It is God's provision we receive.

But this morning I want to make that a more personal provision, God's provision for your salvation, God's provision for my salvation. Sometimes in my Bible reading a verse just seems to jump out of the page. C.H. Spurgeon likened it to being accosted by a lion from the thicket. I was reading the little book of Jude. It's only one chapter and often overlooked because it does have some references in it that we don't find anywhere else in the Canon of Scripture. On the other hand it has some of the most comforting words of the New Testament. Jude starts his letter in his greeting, "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:" (Jude v1).

Jude is writing to the church of God and he describes them succinctly as **called**, **beloved** and **kept** – three very powerful verbs, but in each case the subject of the verb is God, and the object is every Christian believer. This is **God's provision** for His people, for every one of us here this morning. We need to grab a hold of these truths and cling to them for they are life to us, for as Christians, we receive God's call, God's love and God's keeping power.

We are **called** by God. You are not born into the church. As Billy Graham used to say you may be born in a garage but that doesn't make you a car. You are called by God to become one of his people, to be the people of rebirth. For some of you that call was momentous, you knew God was calling you to follow Him. For others the call was almost like a still small voice when you were young. John tells us that Jesus "came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, **who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**" (John 1:11-13). Those who receive the Christ are born of God says John, and two chapters later John amplifies what he means when Jesus talks to Nicodemus about being born again or born from above. Paul's letters are full of God's calling; for example he says in Romans that we are called to belong to Jesus Christ (1:6), we are called to be saints (1:7) and we are called according to His purpose (8:28). As Barclay says "The calling of God is the privilege, the challenge and the inspiration of the Christian life." God calls us to Himself, to forsake ourselves and to follow Him, and then He continues to call us closer, to follow closer, to continue to receive His love and grace in even greater measure. "Further up and further in" as Aslan calls to the children in C.S. Lewis' "Last Battle". There is so much more!

But why does God call us? Because of His great **love** for us. Jude tells us that we are beloved in God. God has set His love upon us, not because we deserve it, quite the opposite, we are often rebellious, but wonders of wonders, God in His unfathomable grace, actually loves us. Do we really know deep within our hearts that we are beloved by God? It is the great story of the Bible, it's the great love story of God for His people and the lengths to which he will go to wo us.

There is a strand running through the Scriptures of the love of God for His people likened to the love of the bridegroom for his bride. In the Old Testament we see this beautifully portrayed in the Song of Songs and also in the book of Hosea, where despite the unfaithfulness of Israel, God says "I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness." (Hosea 2:19-20). But this strand of teaching is not restricted to those two books.

Isaiah says “as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” (Isaiah 62:5). Jeremiah is told “Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.” Ezekiel has a similar picture “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.” (Ezek. 16:8). God is likening his relationship to Israel as a marriage. Interestingly some rabbinic literature sees God’s proposal to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai to be their God and they to be his people as a proposal of marriage, with the Law as the betrothal contract and Moses as the friend of the bridegroom.

In the New Testament, we have the picture of the church as the bride in Ephesians 5 and in Revelation 21, linking in to Jesus describing himself to the bridegroom e.g. Matt 9:15 & Matt 25: 1-10. John the Baptist saw Jesus as the bridegroom “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:28-30).

You see the picture is drawn from Jewish wedding customs. The groom comes to the bride’s home and negotiates with the bride’s father a bride price and the betrothal contract is signed. The bridegroom then returns to his father’s house to prepare a place for his bride. During the intervening time the bridegroom sends gifts to the bride and the bride prepares for her wedding. After a period of time, the bridegroom returns for his bride, although the bride does not know the exact time of his arrival. The bride dresses herself and then accompanies the bridegroom to his father’s house. I hope as I have outlined those customs that light bulbs have been going off in your minds as you see the scriptural allusions to Christ and His church. Jesus loves you so much that He has paid the bride price on the cross, “You are not your own but you were bought with a price” says Paul (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

I love the words of George Robinson’s hymn, which should be the testimony of all Christians:

Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know;
Gracious Spirit from above,
Thou hast taught me it is so!
O this full and perfect peace!
O this transport all divine!

In a love which cannot cease,
I am His, and He is mine.
In a love which cannot cease,
I am His, and He is mine.

You **are** the beloved of God, you may not feel it but receive the trustworthy word of God.

But how can we ever live up to what God, in His love, has called us to be? Jude tells us, God **keeps** us. We are kept by God, He guards us. Here is something to really encourage us. As Barclay says “The Christian is never left alone. Christ is always the sentinel of his life and the companion of his way.” Jesus said “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28) and He also said “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). He is not going to let you go and nobody is going to snatch you away – that is total security and safety. Picture the young child with its little hand holding its parent’s big hand – safe and secure because the parent won’t let go. Or changing the metaphor, listen to Jesus’ words in our gospel reading “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matt. 6:26). If God can look after the sparrows, then can He not look after you? You are of more value than the sparrows because God has set His love upon you.

Jude amplifies his thinking on being kept by God in his glorious doxology in verses 24-25. “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” God is able to keep us from stumbling, not only that but He is able to present us blameless before His presence. And He does all that with great joy. Surely we have here a picture of the bringing of the bride of Christ into His presence. As Paul says in Ephesians 5 “ “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself **in splendour**, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Eph. 5:25-27).

So, take these three verbs to heart this morning, you are **called**, **beloved** in God the Father and **kept** for Jesus Christ. God has provided everything for your salvation, so now to God be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.