

Scripture Readings for Sunday 8th December 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NIV)

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. ² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; ⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

⁵ Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion will graze together¹; and a little child will lead them. ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Romans 15:4-13 (NIV)

⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. ⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name."² ¹⁰ Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."³ ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him."⁴ ¹² And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope."⁵ ¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹ There are translation issues here, see NET Bible and LXX. (This makes most sense in this context.)

² Psalm 18:49.

³ Deuteronomy 32:43.

⁴ Psalm 117:1

⁵ Isaiah 11:10.

Sermon: The Stump of Jesse

Advent is a time of *waiting*, but what are *we* waiting for? Before I address that question, let's remind ourselves what the Jews themselves were waiting for in the first century. The simple answer is that they were waiting for the *Messiah* to come, the One who would bring *peace*. We know this from various contemporary Jewish writings, such as those from the Dead Sea Scrolls, where we find that they had rediscovered the ancient words of the Old Testament prophets, like those of Isaiah, and had interpreted some of them as yet to be fulfilled. One such oracle is our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 11 this morning. It is the third in a triplet of fascinating, and well-known texts that are often read around Christmastime.⁶ There is a good reason for that, and I'll come back to that later too. Advent provides us with an opportunity to revisit some of those Old Testament prophecies and consider how they would have been understood in their own day and how the Jews could later reinterpret them for new times. Please bear with me for a moment as I try and put these oracles of Isaiah into some historical context.

Isaiah was writing in the reign of King Ahaz of Judah,⁷ around 735 BC, at a time of war.⁸ Briefly, King Pekah of Israel⁹ attacked King Ahaz in Jerusalem but could not take the city and so he besieged it.¹⁰ King Pekah then allied himself with King Rezin of Syria,¹¹ causing great fear in the heart of King Ahaz and his people. God told Isaiah to advise and reassure King Ahaz,¹² but the king's response demonstrates his unwillingness to trust in God.¹³ Isaiah then tells Ahaz that God will give him a gracious *sign* of confirmation: "Look," he says, "the young woman¹⁴ is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."¹⁵ The woman is most likely Abi(jah), the wife of the king, and having a son was a reassuring sign of the *continuity* of the Davidic line. Their son, Hezekiah, was later born and Isaiah 9:2-7 is usually understood as a song of celebration at his birth.¹⁶ We are familiar with those words too, since they contain the line: "For a child *has been* born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."¹⁷ These grand titles suggest a profound belief in *God's provision* of this child and of God's involvement in

⁶ See Isa 7:14; 9:2-7; 11:1-10. The author is known as 1st Isaiah and who wrote Isa 1-39, a contemporary of Micah (in the Southern Kingdom) and Hosea and Amos (in the Northern Kingdom). He seems to have been based in Jerusalem.

⁷ Southern Kingdom.

⁸ The Syro-Ephraimite war (735-732 BC), see 2 Kings 15:29-16:20 and 2 Chron 28 - well before the Babylonian exile.

⁹ Northern Kingdom, whose capital is Samaria.

¹⁰ Isa 7:1; 2 Kings 16:5.

¹¹ Or Aram, with its capital in Damascus.

¹² Isa 7:3-9.

¹³ Isa 7:12-13.

¹⁴ The familiar word "virgin" comes from the *Greek* LXX (cited in Matt 1:23; Luke 1:27,34 – and implied in Matt 1:18,20,25). This is a more specific meaning of the more general *Hebrew* word for "young woman" in Isa 7:14 (NRSV).

¹⁵ Isa 7:14 (NRSV). See too the connection between Isa 7:14 ("Immanuel") with the "LORD is with you" in the call of Gideon, Judges 6:12,16; i.e., this need not be restricted to a messianic interpretation (or be seen as blasphemous).

¹⁶ Or his coronation (or a combination of both); i.e. it is a hymn of *thanksgiving* rather than a prophecy.

¹⁷ Isa 9:6 (NRSV). Notice the past verb tense implies a *fulfilment*. This could, however, be seen as the "prophetic past", where the events are still in the future but are put in the past tense as they are "as good as done"; see *Jewish Study Bible*, Edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 801.

history. What this also means is that these proclamations, which are often interpreted as *messianic prophecies*, also had an *immediate* context and fulfilment in the minds of Isaiah and his audience. I relate this, as many Christians don't appreciate this historical background. Incidentally, King Hezekiah did introduce some important reforms¹⁸ but, by the end of Isaiah 39, we have a more critical assessment of his reign indicating that he did not live up to those initial high hopes and expectations.¹⁹

In contrast to Isaiah 9, in Isaiah 11 - our reading this morning - the verbs are in the *future* tense:²⁰ "A shoot *will* come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch *will* bear fruit. ²The spirit of the LORD *will* rest on him . . ." ²¹Jesse was King David's father²² and reference to his "stump" means that from his family tree *God himself will* raise up a new leader.²³ This image serves to express the persistent hope of a Davidic figure who will permanently rule with justice and peace, and who will honour God.²⁴ While this is distinctly a Jewish hope, it is one that *all* humanity still shares. This beautiful text comes in two parts,²⁵ *both* signifying the coming reign of God. The second image of a harmonious creation relies on the achievements of God's new king described in the first part. Let's briefly look at both sections.

First, the character of the king's rule will be shaped by the spirit of the LORD²⁶ which will endow the king with three *pairs* of qualities: (a) practical wisdom and judicial understanding,²⁷ (b) sound diplomatic and military judgement, and (c) knowledge and reverence for God.²⁸ These are the credentials of an ideal ruler in any age and are a gift from God! Such a king will follow after God's own heart, and – in part - that means: "He will treat the poor fairly, and make right decisions for the downtrodden of the earth."²⁹ Isaiah also tells us the king will have a reputation for integrity and faithfulness.³⁰ The obvious outcome of all this is a reign of *peace* – and we heard this theme reiterated in our *Call to Worship* from Psalm 72.

Second, Hebrew thought was holistic and so when God brings about peace and *full* restoration through his king, the eventual outcome will also include harmony *within creation*. This involves transformed relationships between human beings and animals, and between predator and prey within creation.³¹

¹⁸ 2 Kings 18:3.

¹⁹ Later, Josiah was another good king and who brought about major reforms; yet the Babylonian exile still occurred.

²⁰ Moreover, it is *not* a hymn of thanksgiving (9:2-7) or explicitly announced as a prophecy from the LORD.

²¹ Isa 11:1-2a. In-keeping with the Old Testament, "spirit" here is *not* capitalised (as "Spirit"; see differentiation in NRSV and NIV).

²² See 1 Sam 16:1.

²³ "Stump" also suggests a seemingly dead root [a (post-exilic?) "remnant"], but yet it still lives! This imagery of trees also follows from the oracle of the destruction of Assyria (see Isa 10:33-34).

²⁴ See also Jer 23:5-6 and Ps 72. This sentiment is consistent with Isa 9:7.

²⁵ Part 1 is Isa 11:1-5; part 2 is Isa 11:6-9. (Some scholars question whether a later editor joined them; but there is no good reason to presuppose that conclusion. Others suggest that Isa 11:1-5 refers to King Josiah, and 9:2-7 to King Hezekiah.)

²⁶ The spirit represents the active and creative *divine* presence known both at creation and in the inspiration of God's prophets (see 2 Kings 2:9; Mic 3:8).

²⁷ Like that of King Solomon. "Wisdom and understanding" are often paired in the OT, especially the Wisdom literature.

²⁸ Isa 11:2.

²⁹ Isa 11:4a.

³⁰ Isa 11:5.

³¹ And between wild and domestic animals (see their differentiation in Gen 1-3). See also Hosea 2:18 and Hab 2:14.

All creation will live together without fear! For little children to play with snakes shows that there *is* no fear in the world. The image is of a vegetarian haven, a return to the Garden of Eden!³² It's a beautiful vision, for who *doesn't* long for a world without fear or violence? Yet such a vision is not easy the trust; we have to admit it does seem more like a fairytale. This is because not only are predators naturally attacking their prey within the animal kingdom, but nations and factions are snapping and snarling at each other, as we saw at the NATO meeting this week in London. As the fictional medieval monk, Cadfael, said: "Only when the warmongers and soldiers *pray* for peace will peace actually come." Lighting a peace candle on Advent Sunday and re-reading this text is a reminder of the kind of peace we are waiting for. But the prophet's promise of peace and reconciliation, especially that tranquility within nature, can ultimately *only* be *the work of God* and not of humans. Clearly all this is something Isaiah never expected to see in his lifetime, but this is what he understood the fully-realized reign of God to imply. Moreover, Isaiah saw God's peace as including *both* Jews and non-Jews.³³

I mentioned at the beginning that the Jews regard such prophetic texts as pointing to a *future* Messiah. That's because despite the reforms of Kings Hezekiah and Josiah, their actions all fell short of expectation. Moreover, the Jews rightly proclaim, "God *will* accomplish what he promises!"³⁴ The Jewish rabbis and scholars therefore see those ancient oracles as only *partially* fulfilled and have no problem in reinterpreting scripture accordingly. In other words, those words of Isaiah have *more than one* meaning, something for his own day and, when adapted by a faithful community of believers, something else for a later generation too.³⁵ The Jews in the first century were waiting in hope for this Messiah to deliver them from Roman oppression; Jews are still waiting today. The early church, however, saw these prophecies as being fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

It is for this reason that Paul, in our New Testament reading, quotes Isaiah: "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope."³⁶ Paul saw Jesus *as the Messiah*, the hope of *all* the nations, not just the Jews. Remember, whenever we read the word "Christ" in the New Testament, it's *not* the surname of Jesus, it's a *title*, it's the Greek translation ("*christos*") of the Hebrew word "Messiah"! As we have already heard, Isaiah prophesied, "The spirit of the LORD *will* rest on him."³⁷ When Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth, Luke writes that Jesus quoted from the scroll of Isaiah, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me."³⁸ Notice the change in verb tense; you can therefore understand the reaction of the synagogue crowd: "Isn't this just Joseph's son?"³⁹ Both Luke

³² In Gen 1:29–31 we read that God created a vegetarian world-order! See also Isa 65:17-25; Ezek 34:25, and Rev 22:1-5.

³³ Isa 11:10.

³⁴ Isa 9:7; 37:32.

³⁵ Such adaptation of OT scripture was a normal part of rabbinical teaching (and by the Essenes in Qumran) and should not be seen as an illegitimate use of scripture.

³⁶ Rom 15: 12 (Isa 11:10). In Rom 15:4, Paul endorses the use of the OT - something that many Christians disregard today.

³⁷ Isa 11:2.

³⁸ See Luke 4:18; he cites Isa 61:1-2. It doesn't really matter if Jesus *actually* said those words, *Luke* understood Jesus to be fulfilling that messianic role (hence his gospel) and the whole early church agreed!

³⁹ Luke 4:22.

and Matthew have long and seemingly boring genealogies of Jesus in their opening chapters.⁴⁰ Their function is to show to a Jewish audience that Jesus is not *just* a part of the Davidic line, he *is the continuation of the story of Israel*, of God's action *in* history. And both Matthew and Luke cite the prophets in their birth stories of Jesus to show how this baby is the fulfilment of all of Israel's hopes.⁴¹ They also add angelic visits and visions to indicate that God is once again working within history to fulfil his purposes through the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah.⁴² So when Isaiah writes: "He will treat the poor fairly, and make right decisions for the downtrodden of the earth"⁴³ we can't help but see the gospels' portrayal of Jesus amongst the poor and the victimized, and confronting religious and political leaders. In making these connections, the early church redefined the common notion of a kingship and the meaning of the "kingdom [or reign] of God" that Jesus began. Christians therefore proclaim that it is in Christ that the justice of God and the peace of God come together.

I said at the beginning that "Advent is a time of *waiting*," and asked, "What are *we* waiting for?" The simple answer is *two* things. First, we are waiting to celebrate, once again, the coming⁴⁴ of Jesus, the Davidic shoot from the stump of Jesse at that first Christmas. We are acknowledging once more that he is the Messiah and that God did indeed act decisively in history. Second, we are waiting in hope for the coming completion of what God has promised, the *full realization* of God's peaceable kingdom. As followers of Jesus, we are already part of God's new creation,⁴⁵ but there is much more to come. At the end of the book of Revelation, we read: "Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth.'"⁴⁶ Here John is quoting from Isaiah 65 and that particular oracle includes the words: "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox," so echoing Isaiah 11.⁴⁷ This peaceful co-existence within nature is yet to come through a divine act of *re-creation*; this Jewish vision is, then, part of the Christian story and part of *our* waiting today.

In conclusion: Isaiah's declaration stands in direct contrast to the terror and brutality that pervade our world today. We are all accustomed to fear and violence, disease, climate catastrophe, economic uncertainty, acts of terrorism and civil unrest, and the threat of war. The fear of our children's and grand-children's safety and future is a real concern for all of us. Isaiah also lived in bleak times and, according to him, transformation from a culture of fear to one of peace begins with a shoot from a small stump. A little sign of life coming out of something that seems forgotten or dead. That's how hope gets a start. We have to look for new beginnings in odd places, nurturing growth to help get it established.

⁴⁰ Luke 3:23-38 and Matt 1:1-17.

⁴¹ Matt 1:23 (Isa 7:14); 2:6 (Micah 5:2,4); 2:15 (Hos 11:1); 2:18 (Jer 31:15); 3:3 (Isa 40:3) and Luke 3:4-6 (Isa 40:3-5).

⁴² See also Luke 10:24; Matt 13:17. Note too the prayers of Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Simeon and Anna.

⁴³ Isa 11:4a.

⁴⁴ "Advent" means "coming." which is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*.

⁴⁵ See 2 Cor 15:17.

⁴⁶ Rev 21:1. (see Isa 65:17). In quoting just one verse, the writer implies, "Remember that (whole) prophecy"! In Rev 21:5, we also read: "He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Note the "Isaiah" of Isa 65 is *not* the same "Isaiah" of Isa 11!)

⁴⁷ Isa 65:25 (see Isa 11:6-9). As Theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it: "The coming king will not only do what the world takes to be possible, but will also do what the world has long since declared to be impossible!" Can you ever imagine Brer Rabbit eating with Brer Wolf!?

Who would have thought that a baby born in a manger 2000 years would change world history in the way that Jesus did? As I said a few weeks ago, Jesus is an *unlikely king*⁴⁸ and we need to read history through the lens he provides. Isaiah is clear that it is *God* who will bring about this new era of peace. Some therefore say that Isaiah's call is *not* one to action but to *hope*, but hope in the end *is action*! Because if we want peace, our waiting *cannot* be simply passive, we have to *work* for justice.⁴⁹ Whether we are considering the words of the prophets or those of the writer of Revelation, let us have confidence that God *will* accomplish all that he sets out to achieve because of God's intense devotion to his people.⁵⁰ And as we wait in hope, let peace begin with us. Amen. Let us pray.

⁴⁸ See: <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/An-Unlikely-King.pdf> .

⁴⁹ This partnership with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is *our* calling. But we must always remember its *God's* vision.

⁵⁰ Isa 9:7. Or "the Zeal of the Lord will accomplish this" in traditional language.