

Advent (Isaiah 11:1-10)

(A sermon preached in St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 9 December 2007)

I find that Advent can be rather confusing. What is it that we're looking forward to? Is it Christmas when we celebrate the coming of Christ at Bethlehem? Or is it the future coming of the Lord, the second advent, as we sometimes call it? Are we looking forward to the first coming of Christ in incarnation, the birth of the king, or to his second coming in glory, for judgment, when the kingdom of God will come in its fullness and all God's creation will be redeemed? When all the shops proclaim that Christmas is only just around the corner, it's easy to see Advent as pointing to that coming of Christ that we celebrate at Christmas. But the prayers and the lectionary readings for Advent actually point us to both. It seems confusing, but we could try to put the two together by saying this about Christmas: Bethlehem was a beginning of a story that still has a great deal of future. The Jesus who was born at Bethlehem is not just a figure of the past, but also the Jesus still to come. The kingdom he inaugurated in his ministry and his resurrection is not yet manifested in all creation and cannot be while evil still ravages the world. To believe in the Jesus who was born at Bethlehem, the Messiah who brings God's kingdom into the world, must also be to hope for his coming in the future.

This, I think, can help us when we read those prophecies of the Messiah from the OT prophets that many of us are familiar with from Advent services, not least services of nine lessons and carols. You might wonder why John the Baptist is in our readings today – I think mainly because John was the last of those great prophets of Israel who turned the eyes of the people of Israel to wards the future coming of their Messiah. John the Baptist summed up those prophetic hopes and saw them beginning to be realised. But I want to talk this morning, not about John the B, but about the prophecy we read from Isaiah 11: Isaiah's vision of the shoot from the stump of Jesse. For prophets like Isaiah, the future seems to be telescoped. They see God's purpose of sending his Messiah and establishing his kingdom, but they see it all together, just as we might see distant objects without seeing the distance between them. Does Isaiah speak of the first or the second coming of Christ? The answer is: both, both at once, and that may actually help us to look with the eyes of the Advent season to the birth of Christ as the beginning of a story that has still to reach its conclusion.

A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse.
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

From the start we know that Isaiah is talking about a king, for Jesse was the father of king David. You may remember that story where the prophet Samuel goes to visit Jesse and his family in order to anoint the future king, the man God has chosen to replace king Saul. Samuel sees all of Jesse's sons except David, the youngest, the shepherd boy. He was so insignificant no one had even thought to fetch him along with the others. But he was God's chosen king, the man after God's own heart, the ideal king whom Israel remembered with disappointment because David's descendants, the kings of Israel from Solomon to Zedekiah, did not live up to expectations. With few exceptions they fulfilled none of the promise that God's appointment of David as king had offered.

So what Isaiah sees is the great tree of Jesse – the royal house of David – cut down to a mere stump, cut down by God's judgment. The royal line of the kings of Israel came to an end. But a shoot grows out of the stump. Not a branch from the tree, but a root from the stump when

one might well have thought that the tree was dead. The ideal king who is coming, the new David, will not be a descendant of Solomon and the kings of Israel. Rather God will go back to the origins of the dynasty and raise up a king from some other line of descent from David. Just as David himself was not raised in a royal palace, but was rather an insignificant shepherd boy, so the new David will be seemingly insignificant, of humble origins, an unexpected king, someone without the prestige and privilege that rulers so often abuse. And when the Gospel of Luke gives us the genealogy of Jesus, we find his descent from David traced, not through Solomon and the line of the kings of Israel, but from David's son Nathan and through a long list of descendants of Nathan who are not even mentioned in the OT.

Jesus, born at Bethlehem, which was where David's family originated but was not where Solomon or any of the kings of Israel were born – this Jesus is God's Messiah, raised unexpectedly from humble origins. The real importance of this lies in what Isaiah says about the task of this new David. His task is to rule righteously, providing especially justice for the poor. Kings born in royal palaces all too easily favour the rich and the powerful, the social elite they identify with, and neglect the interests of ordinary people. But because David came from humble origins himself, he was both a man of the people and a man after God's own heart. It would be good to remember that too about Jesus when we read the Christmas stories this Christmas. Jesus was like neither Herod nor Caesar. He was a different sort of king, a king after God's own heart, and that difference began with his birth in humble circumstances to a family of no status in society.

Instead of worldly power and prestige, Isaiah's coming king is endowed with something else: the Spirit of God: 'the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.'

And so what are the characteristics of his reign? We could sum it up in two phrases: justice for the poor and peace with wild nature. The first is clear enough, I guess. Let me say a word about the second. This is the famous image of the peaceable kingdom:

the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

And it goes on ...

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

People often take this passage to speak simply of peaceful relationships between animals. But really it's about peace between, on the one hand, humans and their domestic animals, and on the other, wild animals:

the wolf with the lamb
the leopard with the kid
the bear with the cow
the poisonous snake with the little child.

The little child is there as the most vulnerable of humans, at most risk from dangerous animals.

Isaiah of course sees both the problem of justice for the poor and the problem of ecological conflict in form those problems took in his time and place. And he sees the solutions in similarly appropriate terms. In our world they are different. But in general terms they remain surely the most urgent issues of our time.

Do we see justice for the poor or harmony with nature as we look around our world? Actually, for all humanity's material progress in the modern period, both of these problems are much, much greater than they were in Isaiah's day. They must have seemed pretty intractable then. They are all the more so now. Isaiah's vision seeks fulfilment still in our future. We still await this righteous and peaceable kingdom of God's Messiah.

So did his first coming make no difference? Was nothing changed by Christmas and Easter? Notice the last two verses of our passage:

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him; and his dwelling shall be glorious.

The knowledge of the LORD is key: justice and peace flow from it. Jesus, the root of Jesse, already stands as a signal to rally the nations and bring them to the knowledge of his God. And for those who have eyes to see, wherever justice and peace break out there are fragments of the kingdom already to be seen. Not some kind of incremental progress as the world gets gradually better – no sign of that, and we were never promised it. But fragments of the vision, real foreshadowings of the kingdom to come. Justice for the poor and peace with nature are possible because they are God's own purpose for his world.