

NAURC worship 20th December 2020

Readings:

Isaiah 11.1-10

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

2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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

7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

9 They will 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.

10 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.

Luke 1. 39-56

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40** where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42** and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among

women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary^o said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Sermon

My brother gave us the gift of a year's membership of the Woodland Trust last year, so I've tried to support the Trust this year by buying some Christmas cards and this Advent calendar with lovely illustrations by Amanda Loverseed. It's a tree with doors that open to show lots of different creatures. Now some of you might say it's not particularly a Christmas picture – it's not even a Christmas tree. Some of you might have immediately made a connection with the reading from Isaiah 11 which talks about a shoot coming out of the stump of Jesse and a branch coming out of his roots, and some might remember the Jesse tree service last year at Princes Street. Well, I do think the Advent calendar has a connection to Isaiah 11 and to Christmas but we're not doing the Jesse tree this year.

Like other passages in Isaiah, this is a song or poem that presents us with a vision of the coming of the Messiah or king and of his kingdom. We don't know exactly who the messiah is meant to be at this time – was Isaiah's prophecy referring to his own time

or to a future time? That's the mystery of prophecy – now or not yet? What we do know about the Messiah is that he will be a king somehow connected to Jesse, the father of Israel's greatest king, David. And he will be filled with the Spirit of God, full of wisdom and insight, of counsel and might, full of knowledge and fear of the Lord (fear = This type of fear does not necessarily mean to be afraid of something. Rather, it is a reverential awe of God, a reverence for His power and glory.)

And what will his kingdom be like? Before we look at that, perhaps we should remind ourselves of a world where powerful kingdoms were at work – seeking to gain dominance in the middle east – Assyria, Egypt, Babylon amongst them. They were kingdoms where the powerful had immense riches (archaeological discoveries) and yet most of the people in those lands were ordinary poor people scraping a living or perhaps even captured and enslaved. And were those people treated well? Well, of course there were rules and laws. Were they fair and just? We don't know what people thought but life was tough and often violent, a daily struggle.

So it's not surprising to find that this vision of the messianic kingdom is one where justice is paramount. And let's not confuse justice with punishment. Although the evil of the wicked is addressed, the emphasis here is on setting things straight or putting things right and treating everyone fairly. This is a kingdom where the king breathes, speaks and the world is made new. Some of you will already be making connections here to Genesis 1 – the wind or breath or spirit of God sweeps over the face of the waters and God speaks – and the world is brought into being and God saw that it was good. This vision in Isaiah 11 takes us backwards and forwards to think about what God's kingdom was meant to be, is meant to be – a place where everyone is treated equitably, with justice.

And it's not only about a new kind of life for humankind, the whole created order will be as it was meant to be. Nature itself is transformed. This is a kingdom of peace where predators like wolves and lions and leopards and bears and prey like lambs and calves and baby goats can live together. And this is where the Advent calendar comes in – this tree is full of all kinds of animals and birds living peaceably together – I know it's stretching the point but I think it's a fun illustration of harmony in creation. In the peaceable kingdom even the eating habits of the predators will change. Arguing about whether that can happen is missing the point of this amazing vision – that hostility and fear aren't part of life in this kingdom. And even more amazing – we move back to Genesis again – the child will not fear the snake. The curse of evil is removed. Humankind is restored to its role of caring for the whole created order. The kingdom of this Messiah, this root of Jesse, extends over the whole earth and the nations will be drawn to him for that's where they will see God's glory.

Like other passages in Isaiah that we've been hearing about in the last few weeks, we get a really strong visual picture. In the first week we looked at the image of how we can make ourselves open and available to being shaped by God much **like a potter** does with clay. In the second week, the image was that of **road building**, and we thought about what we need to do to make the way smooth and clear for God to come and meet us. Last week's image was of a **herald of good news**. This week

our image is of the coming Messiah or **king who will transform the whole created order**.

As we draw nearer to Christmas itself, the anticipation grows - I'm not sure my explanation of this passage does justice to its 'wow' factor – it's a really powerful, extraordinary – and hopeful – vision. We still live in a world that's tough and unequal and unjust, where the powerful nations jostle for supremacy, where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, where we have become increasingly aware of the fragile state of the world's ecosystems as we continue to exploit its resources. It's all too easy to get dispirited, especially as we live through these difficult times.

But as Christmas comes round again, we hear the message of hope once more – someone is coming who changes everything, who turns the world upside down. Christians believe that Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed saviour, comes to bring justice and peace. Mary's song, which we call the Magnificat, rings in our ears. Her song starts with an outpouring of praise to God for blessing her with this baby, but Mary is a woman immersed in scripture (you can tell that from her references to OT texts) and she is a woman of her time, living under the rule of a cruel king and under the might of the Roman Empire. She knows about poverty and oppression. She sings for her people. Mary knows their longing and their hopes of a Messiah and of a rule that will bring justice, equity and peace. So she sings of the proud being scattered, and the rich being brought low, and of the hungry being fed and the downtrodden being lifted up. This is an amazing song of joy and hope – I love the way Tom Wright describes it,

'it's the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus.....Mary and Elisabeth, like so many Jews of the time, searched the scriptures, soaked themselves in the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil, of God coming to the rescue at last. All of that is poured into this song, like a rich, foaming drink that comes bubbling over the edge of the jug and spills out all round.'

But as another writer, Maggi Dawn, points out, even as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we realise that we live in a far from perfect world, there is still injustice, poverty, illness, hunger and death. Did Isaiah and Mary just dream impossible dreams? Can we still find hope and joy in the promise of a world turned upside down by the birth of a baby in a manger? Maggi Dawn suggests that the Magnificat says salvation is about the whole of life.

'it's about justice for the oppressed, light in the darkness, freedom for the enslaved. But Luke's gospel nowhere suggests that justice is going to be delivered miraculously...by Jesus. Instead he shows us a Jesus who teaches that the gospel cannot be a promise of justice unless it is understood also as a call to justice....True faith in Jesus and in his gospel can stir us to action... (neither Isaiah's vision nor) Mary's song are prophecies that didn't come true or dreams of utopia, but they are visions of justice that demand an active response.'

Is there hope? Yes. All the small things we do – giving to Christian Aid, buying charity Christmas cards, collecting for the foodbank, supporting those who work with the homeless, letting a corner of the garden grow wild, putting out food for the birds, recycling our rubbish, abiding by the rules and keeping each other safe from Covid... I'm sure you can think of lots more examples. Small stepsbut they are changing the world – bringing those visions into reality. As we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus this Christmas, I'm going to end with these words from Christian Aid:

'The foretelling of the birth of her son, the Son of the Most High, awakens in Mary the dream that will not die. A dream of a world where the lowly are lifted up. A dream where those who are hungry are filled, and where those who have misused their power are brought low.

It is a dream that is awakening in us all this year as we realise the true value and worth of people and what really matters. As we sing the words of When Out of Poverty is Born together may we imagine how we might build back with justice after the dramatic disruption of coronavirus.

In raising our voices in song may we galvanise and amplify our prophetic voice in calling for a world where all have enough to eat, where all are valued equally and treated with dignity and justice, where all are given opportunity to flourish and live life to the full, free from oppression and restrictions on their lives. And in raising our prophetic voice may we also be active in preparing the way for that better possible world.'

We sing together the hymn written by Kathy Galloway and used in the Christian Aid material this Christmas.