

Sunday 4th December

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

You have probably heard the story about the new Christian who was eager to seek God's guidance for his life. He knew that God spoke through the Bible, but wasn't quite sure where to start reading so that he could hear what God had to say to him. So he opened the Bible at random and pointed his finger to a verse on the page. "And Judas hanged himself" was the verse he read.

Unimpressed, he thought he would try again. Again the Bible was opened at random. This time he read "go and do likewise". Taking verses out of context can lead to all sorts of misinterpretations.

To be able to fully understand the Bible we need to be aware of the context of the passage we are looking at. In other words find out something about the history, the culture, what had happened previously, who was speaking etc etc

On Sundays we generally follow the lectionary readings – a selection of readings from OT and NT selected for each Sunday, taking into account the season in the church's year – for example as today with the season of Advent in mind. This means that we often have a short reading plucked from an Old Testament prophecy, for example, with no explanation of when it was written or why it was written – this morning's reading from Isaiah being a good example.

This passage (or verses from it) are often read at Advent or Christmas carol services, so much so that our first thought is to immediately link the prophecy with Jesus. The shoot from the stump of Jesse – what else could this be? The NT writers (Matthew in particular) emphasise the importance of the genealogy of Jesus going back to David (and hence to Jesse, David's father). Surely the passage could only have been written with the coming of Jesus in mind.

But prophecies such as this one were primarily addressed to other contexts. And to get the most out of the reading we would do well to look at that original context.

In the early chapters of Isaiah we read about the Assyrians who had conquered Israel (and many other nations) and now ruled over them. The prophecy in chapter 11 is primarily a prophecy of hope to the people of Israel in this time of utter despair. Chapter 10 ends with these words

Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

The prophet is foretelling the destruction of Assyria. The mighty armies of the Assyrian empire will be defeated. They will be like tall trees that are felled. This empire will not go on for ever. There is hope!

And chapter 11 describes that hope. Where the trees have been hacked down, a shoot will come through. There will be new growth, a new beginning. But this won't be Assyria. It will be from the stock of Jesse. The line of David. The Israelite nation. Jerusalem will be restored. The people of God will live again.

Things won't be like they are for ever. And the rest of the chapter describes in picture language how old enmities will be cast aside; justice and righteousness will reign, and the Spirit of God will be with the king in all he does. A new vision of the mission and purpose of the chosen people of God.

A wonderful vision.

Let's hold that for a moment and move on to the New Testament, to our gospel reading; the story of John the Baptist.

We know quite a lot about John. His parents – Elizabeth and Zechariah. The manner of his birth – the story of the childless couple, the message to Zechariah that he didn't believe, his being struck dumb. Hope where there was no hope for Elizabeth and Zechariah

We know too about the task John had – going before Jesus in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn people from their wickedness, to call for repentance and to prepare the way for the Lord. His mission was to proclaim the coming of the Messiah – to proclaim hope from despair.

And his lifestyle (abstaining from wine, his diet, the fact he led a simple perhaps semi-monastic life), and the references to the spirit of Elijah mean there is much in common between John and the OT prophets. Perhaps John can be seen as the last of the OT prophets and the one who ushered in the New Testament – this new way of God dealing with his people. John had a pivotal role, ushering in the new hope.

So here in our gospel reading we have John in the desert, calling on people to repent because the kingdom was near. Baptising people as an outward sign of their repentance. Talking of the one that was to come after him.

And then some of the religious leaders come to him. And he launches into a tirade against them (again reminiscent of the OT prophets at their strongest). You brood of vipers. You think that because you call yourself children of Abraham you are Ok. Well you're not. What matters is the fruit you produce, which reflects the state of your relationship with God. You think you are in God's favour, but you are not.

And then he uses words that echo the earlier reading from Isaiah.

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

That tree image again. The trees that are cut down in judgement.

And here's where we can draw on the OT to illuminate the NT. The prophecy of Isaiah hinted at here is given a new meaning, a new interpretation – perhaps the one we are more familiar with.

These religious leaders are like the Assyrians – they have taken over the people of Israel and led them astray. But there is one coming – the fresh shoot from the stock of Jesse – who will be filled with the Spirit and rule with justice and righteousness. He will bring the people back to God. The kingdom of God will be restored. There is hope in these times of despair.

John was using OT language – cutting down trees, throwing dead wood into the fire, winnowing forks, and so on; but when this king – this Jesus – this Messiah came he would bring a new language, a language of love and care and forgiveness, a language of eternal life and fulfilment. A completely new way of understanding and appreciating God. A new vision of God.

This truly was the end of an era and the beginning of something new and wonderful. John was the bridge between the two eras. And we know from our own experience what's on the other side of the bridge - a life with and for Jesus.

And so looking back from 2000 years on what can we learn today from the Isaiah passage and the story in Matthew??

First, that the mighty and the powerful, the leaders and those in authority are not necessarily right, nor will they be there for ever and that they have to be called out. Sometimes a spade needs to be called a spade.

In the gospel reading the Pharisees and Sadducees, the learned ones, the ones who people looked up to - are shown for what they are – instead of leading the people in the way, they are leading them astray.

And if we seek to apply lessons from these passages to our world today, we might say that perhaps its time for us to take a good look at our own leaders and weigh them up against God's truth and God's ways. Are our leaders seeking reconciliation, harmony, justice, peace and the ways of love and acceptance – or are they bringing division?

The prophecy of Isaiah talks about barriers being broken down and uses pictures of the wolf and the lamb, the calf and lion to illustrate this - the child leading them, judgement in favour of the meek and poor. To God all people are important, all have potential and all are loved and cared for. And he will do something about it. Eventually in the person of Jesus and the final judgement, but also along the way – raising up individuals and communities who will change things.

And second, that this illustrates a recurring pattern in scripture that hope comes from God in times of despair. Follow it through the scriptures. From Abraham, Joseph, through Moses, the exile and now the Roman occupation and the rule based oppression of the religious leaders. God does bring hope. A new future. New possibilities. Its easy to get depressed about the way the world is, the way our nation is and how things don't look like getting any better. But God's timescale and vision is much bigger. He sees the pain and the suffering; he sees the way the leaders are ruling; he knows what his people are going through. And he promises better. There is hope.

Perhaps we can look back and see that pattern of new hope coming in times of darkness in our own experiences, in our own lives. And look forward – not only to the eternal life offered and promised by Jesus – but to the years ahead of us in this life - with new hope and expectation. Look forward to and grasp the opportunities for us to be agents of this hope-bringing. To be world changers modelling ourselves on Jesus. To be those who bear his fruit, follow his way and bring hope from despair.

Isaiah looked around and saw a nation in turmoil, a nation under the rod of the Assyrian empire; John looked around and saw a nation whose leaders had led them away from God's truth – to a position where what mattered was the letter rather than the spirit of the law. We might look around and see a divided nation, a world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, a society where justice and fairness and compassion are sadly lacking.

But to his world Isaiah brought a message of hope, to his world John brought a message of hope and we too – in this Advent season especially – can bring that same message of hope to ours. In the coming of Jesus at the end of time, but also in the ways we live out his example and teaching in the present time.

As this week's verse of the song Longing for Light that we sang at the start of our worship said:

*Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.*

*Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church
gathered today.*