

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
First Sunday of Advent – Year A

RCL Readings – Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:29-44

Introduction. Advent Sunday is a wonderful day of celebration. It reminds us that many of the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures are fulfilled as the revelation of the promised Messiah is nearly upon us. It helps us look forward with the prophecies that the Messiah will return again, and in many ways, it is the bridge from the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament – the waiting for the Messiah turns to his revelation and prepares us for his return.

Common Theme. These four passages speak about a journey, whether a physical journey to the house of the Lord or a spiritual journey towards the end times and the final revelation of the Messiah at the second coming. They show how the journey involves an assessment of current behaviour and a commitment to the Lord, perhaps even a recommitment as people assess how they are doing in relation to the word of God. They are exciting passages, which hang together on one thread, namely, it does not matter how you behave or think, the Lord is coming back!

Isaiah 2:1-5. Isaiah 2:1-5 is part of a much larger prophecy, which comes to Isaiah as a vision (v. 1 says that he saw this, rather than heard it). Our verses are a prophecy of future international pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the mountain of the Lord. It is as though Isaiah is looking far ahead into the distance to see what will happen in the end times, compared with what follows, which is a picture of what is wrong with the people of God. The prophecy sparks an immediate resonance with today for the believer that, in the future when the Messiah returns to Jerusalem, all will be restored, whereas now there is bad news and sin everywhere in the world, a far cry from what the Lord intended at creation.

The mountain of the Lord's temple in verse 2 refers to Mount Moriah, which is the mountain on which the temple stood, but around it are the much higher mountains of Jerusalem, for example the Mount of Olives, which towers over Mount Moriah. Isaiah records that the natural height of the hills is reversed. Today you would not see Mount Moriah from a distance but in the last days it is said to be higher than any other and even more surprisingly there are people from all nations streaming towards it. We should never forget that in the time of the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel thought of themselves only as the people of God, so the familiar picture today of the people of God being diverse and multinational, would not have been familiar then. The people once heading for the temple were Jewish, but in the last days, they will be from everywhere.

We live in a world where a steady stream of politicians and rulers think they have the answer to everything from war and famine to global warming, yet verse 3 provides a startling revelation – the nations are finding that only the God of Jacob has the answers. They are praying for God to teach them his ways so that they may follow his direction. It is a remarkable turnaround from the world of today and has strong echoes of how Israel had always been told that God had the answers and that following him was the way to go. At last, the world has come to know the same things as Israel had been taught. The

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result of this search is that the law will go out from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (v. 3), a picture of God being the judge and delivering his verdict from Jerusalem instead of people seeking help anywhere except God. As Israel in its better days had sought the Lord for protection, judgement and support, now the nations have learnt the same truth. Hence verse 4 teaches that God is the one who will judge the nations and settle disputes between people and ultimately bring total and complete peace. Jesus taught similarly in Matthew 24 of wars and rumours of war adding, “but then the end will come”, suggesting a change of circumstances. He would likely expect his hearers to know of a prophecy such as Isaiah's. Israel had peace when it sought the Lord and turned to him; it struggled when it ignored God.

As a footnote, it has been argued that Isaiah's picture is one of the Church bringing the Gospel out of Jerusalem and around the world, of the Church bringing peace. Whilst it is true that the Gospel did come from Jerusalem to all nations, it cannot be what is in mind here because the Church's proclamation of the Gospel has not brought peace, sometimes anything but peace. This vision has an understanding of how the God of Jacob had revealed himself in the Hebrew Scriptures and how Israel is still significant with Jerusalem at the centre of the world. Advent teaches us the Messiah Jesus was revealed, which brings us closer to the fulfilment of this vision, but not only in his return will this prophecy be complete.

Psalm 122. This is the third of 15 Songs of Ascent beginning with Psalm 120 in a foreign land, the journey in Psalm 121, and Psalm 122, the joy of finally seeing the House of the Lord and Jerusalem as the Israelites stand within its gates. The Israelites were required to go to Jerusalem for the high feasts of *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Pentecost) and *Sukkot* (Booths/Tabernacles), and this would be a community activity as people would travel together, often over very long distances.

Jerusalem is described as a closely compacted city (v. 3). The verb used for *compacted* is the same verb used when instructions are given for the making of the tent of worship in Exodus 26:11. It is a place where the tribes go up together. Deuteronomy 33 tells us that the tribes all had their own characteristics despite descending from a common bloodline, yet in the House of the Lord, they come together as one. Unity among the tribes comes from belonging to the Lord, not from being identical to one another nor even from being related. It is surely a picture of what lies ahead when there is an outpouring of the Gospel on the Gentiles. The reason they are to come together is not to find and celebrate that unity but to praise the name of the Lord, as they had been instructed in earlier parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. The focus is to be on the Lord, not the people. In return for their travel and praise, they receive “judgement” (NIV) from the thrones of the house of David. Judgement can imply condemnation and even discipline. In our modern world, it is often a word associated with a judge's comments when sentencing a prisoner, but it should be remembered that judgement can also mean justice, which is sometimes a positive thing and expected from a faithful ruler of people.

Verse 6 reminds us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, which should be on the lips of every believer because of Jerusalem's unique position in the world. The *salem* of Jerusalem comes from the same root as the well-known word *shalom* (peace), a sense of security within the walls of this great city.

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There is a link with the previous verse that peace can come from justice. The Lord had promised throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that Israel would experience peace as a result of his justice if they followed his commands. Within this and the following verse, the prayer is about peace and security for those who are *within* the walls. There may be an element of prayer against attack as walls are mentioned, but the focus is very much on the peace that can be found for those inside the walls of Jerusalem. Linked to the idea of rejoicing at going up to the house of the Lord, there is surely more than a hint of being in the protection of the Lord. This idea must surely link to Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44. Here Jesus states that peace in Jerusalem could have been brought about but that the inhabitants had not known him. There is a hint here that they have not sought the right things before the Lord and so rather than look forward to peace, there is coming a time of disaster and destruction. Surely there is an implied warning here that not focusing on the Lord is a dangerous thing to do.

Bearing in mind that Psalm 122 is a community pilgrim psalm, it is written for an individual to say and that is particularly important in verses 8 and 9 where the writer states, "I will say 'Peace be within you'" and "I will seek your prosperity". Clearly, the individual must play their part in prayer as well as the journey.

For the believer today, Jerusalem is still significant as the physical place on earth where so much of the Lord's work has been revealed and to where the Messiah will return. However, the focus we have is on the Kingdom of God, which some define as the Church. We are standing in the presence of the Lord and we come together as the people of God from different places and different backgrounds. We have the common spiritual bloodline of being in Christ, yet we are all different, all here to praise the Lord. Understanding the psalm gives a much deeper and better understanding of our position before the Lord. It helps us to see how there was a fulfilment in the Hebrew Scriptures with implications for the advent of the Messiah.

Romans 13:8-14. If the two previous readings teach us about journeying towards the Lord, then Romans 13 teaches us how to behave in the presence of the Lord. In verse 8, love is the only debt that anyone should have with any other person. The person who loves is defined as the one who has fulfilled the law. Paul, in verse 9, refers directly to Jesus' teaching from Matthew 22:39, the need to love your neighbour as yourself. If this maxim is followed, then the commandments against adultery, murder, theft and coveting are fulfilled. Love fulfils the law. The commandments are of course firmly rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, but the idea of love being such a key component of obedience is also there too. Deuteronomy 6:4-6, known as the "*Shma*, Israel" teaches that only the true love of God is satisfactory. This is an aim that the believer ought to be journeying towards in their daily life.

From verse 11, Paul talks of the situation in the world today, the present time. He warns us that the return of the Messiah is ever closer and that even now we should be prepared rather than being asleep on the job. That we have been saved by grace is a recurrent theme in Paul's epistle to the Romans, and ultimate salvation, being forever in the presence of Jesus, is a time that is rapidly approaching. In verses 13 and 14, Paul is realistic that the current times are not good. He speaks of us being in a night and

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practising deeds of darkness, images used throughout the whole of Scripture as synonyms for disobeying God. He encourages us to put on the armour of light in verse 12, a reference to soaking ourselves in the Holy Spirit and obedience towards God, picking up on the theme of love in the preceding verses. Our behaviour needs to be assessed and changed, putting aside that which is natural to humanity and engaging with the commandments of God. Each believer must be on a journey of change from self-reliance and self-pleasure to reliance on the Lord and reliance on pleasing him, which ironically, will ensure we are much happier than presently. Just as Israel was called to be in the presence of the Lord in the Hebrew Scriptures and to follow his commands, so today every believer is “clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” and think in a godly manner.

Matthew 24:29-44. A true biblical understanding of Advent should always be a warning that, while Messiah Jesus will return, his return is preceded by the most awful of times, worse than has been already experienced. Matthew goes right to the heart of this in verse 29, warning that creation itself will be affected, as the sun darkens and the moon can no longer shine, stars fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies are shaking. It is a terrifying time that lies ahead. Way back in Genesis 3, we had already learnt that humanity and its reaction to God affect the created order, and here as the end times approach, we see it once again. Finally in verse 30, when the Messiah is seen, it is initially not necessarily with joy but with mourning as there is the recognition that God has been rejected and ignored. Suddenly the gap between the sinful human and the almighty and all-powerful God become more apparent than ever before. An announcement is made by his angels and the elect are gathered. The Hebrew Scriptures often speak of angelic announcements, and the whole idea of an elected people of God runs throughout their pages. It is perhaps worth thinking of 1 Kings 19:18 here when Elijah is depressed and the Lord reminds him that 7,000 faithful people have been reserved. No matter how dark the days and how sinful humanity is, the Lord has his chosen ones.

As we turn to verses 32-35, Jesus reminds people that the season is obvious because of what happens to the fig tree and in much the same way they ought to be able to recognise the times they are currently in. We do not have a new picture here. The Jewish understanding has always been that people ought to be able to recognise the circumstances around them if they are tuned into the Lord. Throughout the Prophets are warnings of what is to come. Nothing that has ever been said by the Lord will pass away, even if heaven and earth do. This must surely be a warning to those who would claim that we live in a New Testament Church with no need for the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures are as powerful and relevant today as they have ever been. They point to the New Testament; they point to the coming of the Messiah born in Bethlehem, the same Messiah who will return to Jerusalem.

Scripture generally speaks of the behaviour of humanity and its ignorance of God and his laws. From as early as Adam and Eve through to the end, humanity has been rebellious against God, rejecting his design, his ideas, his teaching and guidance. Jesus himself chooses to focus on Noah who was the only one to heed the warning of impending disaster, whilst everyone else was busy with their normal lives, focused on themselves. Despite the endless warnings in Scripture, the return of the Messiah will be

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much the same. People are not listening, not changing their lives, not journeying towards the Lord but pleasing themselves. They will not even be aware until, as Jesus says in verse 40, “Two men will be in a field; one will be taken and the other left.” The warning follows to be aware that we do not know when the Messiah will come (v. 42), to be ready for him and expect him. The teaching remains as ever rooted in the Scriptures that the warnings are there and that if people take no notice then it will not go well for them. However, to end on a positive note, those who do turn to the Lord and follow him remain safe and secure.

About the author. The Revd Mark K. Madeley was born in 1968. He is an Anglican minister ordained into the Church of England in 1993. Having worked in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, Mark moved to Weston-super-Mare (just south of Bristol on the West Coast) in 2012 where he is currently rector of St. Nicholas with St. Barnabas. Mark also owns a travel company, MIB Travel, and since 2010, he has been operating all of the CMJ Shoresh Study Tours originating in the UK. He is passionate about people going to Israel and learning the truth according to Scripture. He is also president of Christian Friends of Magen David Adom and a vice president of Magen David Adom UK, the UK arm of the Israel ambulance service. He is validated by Durham University as a distance tutor and marks theological and Church history assignments. He is married to Caroline and has two teenage children, Rachel and Benjamin.