

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

RCL Readings – Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-15 (16-19); Romans 15:1-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Introduction. The second Sunday in Advent helps us to concentrate on the fact that Jesus comes out of Israel but makes a difference to the entire world, to both Jew and Gentile. His kingdom is to be like nothing we have seen before because it will be fair, righteous, just and not biased. He will be a king to whom everyone can turn, regardless of status or position, and find they are treated with dignity and respect.

Common Theme. The passages share that common theme of what the Messiah's kingdom is to be like. They speak of things being different to the normal order of the world, how the king (Jesus) will be unlike any other king and how his reign will make people rethink their attitudes and be different.

Isaiah 11:1-10. At the end of chapter 10, Isaiah speaks of a forest of cedar trees cut down by the Lord. It is a picture of the end of the Assyrians and, as cedars do not regrow, this is the final end of the Assyrians. However, in the very next verse (11:1), there is another tree which has already been cut down, the family of Jesse, who like most Israelite families, may well feel defeated. However, Isaiah shows Jesse's tree is a stump with a shoot growing that will bear much fruit. Unlike cedars, deciduous trees can have a root from a stump that will lead to regrowth and the bearing of fruit. This is a picture from nature reflecting the work of the Lord. Jesse's family was from Bethlehem, yet the word used for "branch" is from the same root as the name Nazareth, helping us to understand why people expected Jesus to be a Nazarene in Matthew 2 even though Nazareth is not mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. The branch will bear much fruit – the nation of Israel will rise again. In verse 2, we learn that this branch, the Messiah, will have supernatural wisdom and understanding from the Holy Spirit's wise counsel, knowledge and fear of the Lord. The picture shows that the Messiah will be so much stronger, fairer, and more considerate than any other ruler who has ever lived or will live.

In the two preceding chapters of Isaiah, we are told that in Israel the courts were full of corruption and bribery, that no one could ever have a fair and righteous judgement of their case, but the coming Messiah will be very different, not open to the same bribery and corruption. He will not listen to gossip (v. 3) but judge with righteousness and justice. He will be feared. The idea, too, that he will not judge by what he sees reminds us of the choosing of David. David looked wrong for the role of the king, but in 1 Samuel 16, there is the statement that God looks at the heart, not the outward appearance. Hinted at in David's appointment is a picture of the way in which the Messiah will be when he comes. The last clause of verse 4 shows us that the Messiah has incredible power in his mouth, another indication of the effect of the Word of God. This theme recurs often in the New Testament, think Revelation 1:16, amongst many others. Even verse 5, with its description of righteousness being a belt and faithfulness a sash around his waist, seems a foreshadowing of Paul's teaching on the armour of God. It may not be a direct comparison but so much of what we read in the New Testament is in the Hebrew Scriptures.

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Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and into the New Testament, we are continually reminded that the wickedness of humanity is linked to the suffering and destruction of nature and the created order. Verse 6 onwards shows us that when the Messiah comes, everything will be put back to the way it should have been. It will be so different that even the wolf will lie down with the lamb, the leopard with the goat and so on. Even the lion will become a vegetarian (v. 7) and creation and humanity will live in harmony (v. 8) as infants play near the den of a cobra. Paul said in Romans 8:19, “For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed”. Paul would have known the Isaiah passage and others and demonstrates that he too believes of a reordering yet to come.

Perhaps there is proof of this in the Palm Sunday narrative. Matthew quotes Zechariah 9:9, that the king will come “riding on a donkey, and on the colt, the foal of a donkey” and elsewhere we are told that no one had ever ridden on it before. This is the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled, for it is impossible to ride on an untrained donkey without being thrown off. The Palm Sunday narrative is all the more powerful for a true understanding of Isaiah. Jesus controls nature. As the world focuses on the holy mountain, all things are put right (v. 9) and finally the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord. What starts as a root from a stump becomes a branch from which fruit will grow. There will be a restructuring of the natural order as the focus swings ultimately onto the Lord.

Psalm 72. Psalm 72 begins with a plea for God to bring his justice to the king, whom we surely know as Jesus, and to reveal his righteousness, so that in turn the king may himself rule with righteousness and justice. It is surely a link with Isaiah 11:4. In verse 3 of the psalm we see that again there is a parable based on nature. Mountains and hills produce prosperity and fruit, but here we are speaking of spiritual fruit growing in the fertile soil of God, as opposed to natural fruit finding good growth in natural soil. Such spiritual fruit leads to fair and natural judgement and protection for those who might be seen as vulnerable, whether the children of the poor or those being crushed by oppressors.

As verse 5 begins, there is the promise that this Messianic King will have an endless reign, something clearly true of Jesus. His reign will be forever more, through countless generations. It may be hard to comprehend this when we are so time-bound, but the psalmist points us to the fact that the sun and moon have been there since creation, without a break. This helps us understand the teaching of the New Testament, that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. His eternal reign is rooted in the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, if the length of his reign is to be compared to the ongoing existence of the sun, then the effect of his reign is to be compared to the rain bringing refreshment and growth to the fields. As showers water the earth and encourage growth, so too will the king bring growth and refreshment to the people of God. It is a beautiful picture.

In verses 8-11, we see that the effect of his reign goes well beyond the Israelites. The promises to Israel had been defined by physical barriers of the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and from the desert across to the Euphrates River (Exod 23:31). The king's rule will be over the same dominion and well beyond – over any sea that can be named, over any people groups that exist so that all nations, not just Israel, will bow down and serve him. We hear this echoed in the New Testament, perhaps most clearly in

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Philippians 2 where we read that “every knee will bow and every tongue confess him as Lord” (cf. Isa 45:23). How often the New Testament picks up on themes established in the Hebrew Scriptures. If everyone is to bow before him then there can be no favouritism. Kings will care for the needy and weak who cry out, who face death and who need rescuing from oppression and violence. Whether rich or poor, strong or weak, all will be on the same level. No one except the King will have any authority. With verses 15-17 there is a further promise. Not only is the king to be there forever, not only is he to be fair and just, not only will he help all in need, but there will be a reward in that riches and blessings will flow. Natural resources – whether gold from Sheba or food crops – will be in abundance. The nations will know they are blessed because of the goodness of the king and they will, in turn, call the king blessed. Perhaps to put most simply, blessings abound with the reign of the true king, which leads to the praise of the God of Israel for all he has done, showing that the God of Israel is at the root of everything.

Romans 15:1-13. Paul speaks clearly here of the right and proper attitude of believers toward other people. Instead of taking advantage of weaker people and showing favouritism towards those with whom we would naturally bond, leading to self-pleasure, we should show care and consideration to the weak, building people up (v. 2). This is a Christlike attitude, for Jesus himself was not self-seeking but took on himself the insults aimed at others, a direct reference to Psalm 69:9 but picking up on some of the teachings from our two passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. Verse 4 makes this explicitly clear by telling us that the Hebrew Scriptures teach us endurance and encouragement with the aim of providing hope. Paul is explaining that Jesus does not bring a brand new system that is radically different to anything else that has been known, but rather that everything about Jesus has been revealed first in the Hebrew Scriptures. Perhaps during Advent, this is most clear as easily we recognise Jesus in all of the passages from the Tanakh. With that being the case, Paul expresses a desire that we would have the same attitude as Jesus, which will, in turn, lead us to praise and adoration of the Lord, just as at the end of Psalm 72.

Verse 7 continues the same theme but from the other direction. Instead of focusing on how we regard others, we are told how Jesus regards us. He has accepted us despite all of our imperfections. So what else should we do, or even can we do, except accept others? Paul encourages us Gentiles to accept those different from us – especially our Jewish brothers and sisters – because Jesus fulfilled the promises to the Patriarchs of Israel – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, Paul then reminds the Jewish followers of Jesus that God always intended to include the Gentiles in the Kingdom of Heaven. As with Isaiah and Psalm 72, everything is put right for everyone in the reign of the king. To prove his point Paul then gives us four quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures in verses 9-12, including Isaiah 11, the passage we had first. All four of these quotations mention the Gentiles, clearly demonstrating that God has always wanted to include the Gentiles. There is no new start with Jesus as if the Jews are finished with and now is the turn of the Gentiles. Scripture as a whole shows the ultimate purposes of God have always been Jews and Gentiles made into one new man, as per Ephesians 2.

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Matthew 3:1-12. There is a join between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The join is the coming of Jesus born of Mary in Bethlehem. Following the final prophecies of the Minor Prophets, the Lord had been silent for 400 years and now John the Baptist appears. To put it at the most basic, it is not that God had been conjuring up a plan B but he was waiting for the right moment to reveal his Son. Here it is. We are familiar with John the Baptist being a rather unusual character with an unusual dress sense and unusual diet (v. 4) but it is better to throw our concentration onto the fact that John's call for repentance was born out of Isaiah 40, as Matthew quotes here. Nothing should ever take us by surprise. It has all been spoken of in the past and brought to fruition. Advent is such a wonderful time to remember that so many of God's promises come to light. We shall never know if that is why people went out to meet and hear John. Was it a response to a knowledge of the Scriptures or curiosity that initially took them? It does not matter because the greater thing is Scriptural fulfilment before our very eyes. Many were baptised, which should not strike us as particularly unusual for although baptism itself was not part of Judaism, ritual bathing most certainly was. Water had always been a sign of cleansing oneself, or being cleansed, before God.

John has harsh words for the Pharisees and Sadducees who come to him. He warns them that wrath is coming their way and that they need to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. This picks up on earlier teaching in the psalm about how the reign of the king is refreshing and bears fruit in the life of the believer and, indeed in Isaiah, where it is the branch that will itself bear fruit. Jesus often used similar teaching to explain that true believers can be seen by their fruit. Matthew also hits against the idea that being Jewish is enough. A person cannot just claim physical descent from Abraham as enough. God can bring fruit from the stones, just as we saw in Isaiah that God can bring life out of a tree stump. He also uses the same imagery as Isaiah 9 and 10 that trees not producing fruit are to be cut down in the same way as the enemies of Israel had been. If Jesus is to be the tree grown from the stump, then the believers too are to be trees that flourish and bear fruit. This theme is picked up time and again in Scripture, although sometimes it is spoken of as one tree, such as Jesus being the vine and the believers remaining in him.

Matthew then points our attention to the fact that John was not himself the Messiah. As with so many of the Hebrew prophets, John has a clear ministry of pointing to God. For now, he baptises for repentance but the One who is so much greater will come baptising with the Holy Spirit.

We are to be Christlike in our attitudes and beliefs, yet it comes at a cost. As some will receive baptism and become believers, represented by the wheat, others will be mere chaff to be burnt in the eternal fires. The bringing together of Jew and Gentile into one new man is mirrored by the division of believer from non-believer.

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

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operating all of the CMJ Shores 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.