

Readings for the Second Sunday of Advent

4th December 2022

First Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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. 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; 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. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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.

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.

Second Reading: Romans 15:4-13

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, 'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name'; and again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'; and again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him'; and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.' May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Gospel: St Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."' Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan,

confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 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.

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

A Reflection for the Second Sunday of Advent

When I was on retreat at the beginning of last month, at one point one of our more informal discussions turned to the Brahan Seer. While some maintain that he was a creation of Victorian folklore, according to legend the 17th century Seer, otherwise referred to as 'Dark Kenneth' was a MacKenzie from Seaforth lands in Lewis who came to work on their estates in Easter Ross, at Brahan Castle. Interpretations of some of his prophecies are claimed to refer to the Battle of Culloden, the Highland clearances, and the building of the Caledonian canal. However, the one I had come across before, and which makes me at least pause for thought, is that he is alleged to have predicted that when there were five bridges over the River Ness, there would be worldwide chaos. The fifth bridge over the River Ness was completed in August 1939.

A seer or prophet in this mould, speaking of events that will happen in the future, is one type of prophecy. But, as I have said before, to be a prophet can mean to be a fore-teller of the future or to be a forth-teller, speaking the often not very convenient truth about a situation. Biblical prophets did both, as messengers of God's promises of what will come to be and in calling the people to account for their lack of adherence to their covenant with God.

Isaiah, in today's familiar passage, is looking forward with a vision of the peaceful Kingdom of God. At the time, the people were facing impending doom at the hands of the Assyrians, something that Isaiah described as judgment from God in the preceding chapter. But here he looks beyond to a future hope, a Davidic king who will rescue his people, bringing harmony to all creation. This king will be empowered by the Spirit of God and endowed with wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. This passage gives us hope for that time when the evils of war, oppression and injustice will be stamped out and the most vulnerable and excluded will experience the bounty of all the earth's resources. But implicit in this is also a call to God's people to help bring about this change in the world. Prophets are not interested in those who say that religion and politics do not mix, or those who think their faith is a personal thing and no concern of others. Prophets call people to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with their God as Micah put it.

In our Gospel reading, we see the other aspect of prophecy in the person of John the Baptist. As I'm sure I've mentioned before, we meet John on both the second and third Sundays of Advent, here as the last in the tradition of Old Testament prophets calling people to account. Some of you will know Rev'd Pam Shinkins from Inverasdale. I have never forgotten her, in her own inimitable way, describing John the Baptist as 'a fully paid-up member of the

awkward squad, someone you would think twice about taking home to meet your mother'. It certainly describes this social misfit who has turned his back on Judean polite society, withdrawing to the wilderness with his unusual dress and diet.

Among those who have come out into the wilderness to hear him were some Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious elite with positions of power and privilege. Why have they come? Is it just so they don't miss out on what is happening? John seems to think so and he doesn't wrap his words in politeness, as he calls them to repentance, to turn from their complicity in the oppressive structures that had become the norm in Judea at that time. John tells it as it is, and he doesn't offer the religious elite an easy way out. The call to repentance is to choose a new way of living ... maybe even to the extent of living in the wilderness, wearing camel hair and eating locusts and honey. After all, John himself came from a family of the religious elite – Luke tells us that his father, Zechariah was a priest in the Temple. So the religious leaders are told: 'Bear fruit worthy of repentance.' and don't just rely on your heritage. If you do that, the tree will be cut down – that message was a shock for them and is a warning against complacency for us all. Throughout history, God's people are called to transform their own lives and transform the world, to work to bring in God's Kingdom now.

The reading from Romans, gives us clues of how to go about making the transformation. It urges us to live in harmony with one another, to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us – the weak and the strong, the Jew and the Gentile, the friend and the stranger together. To do that means setting aside our own personal preferences and opinions at times, to go the extra mile; to stay and lend a hand when you'd rather go home, to welcome a stranger with a smile and a conversation when you'd rather chat with a friend. But it also goes beyond the local. In recent years, we have become all too aware of how the choices we make in our lives have an impact, sometimes a devastating impact, on others across the world, particularly through the effects of climate change.

On Friday evening, the winners of 2022 Earthshot Prize were announced in Boston, USA (I am writing this before the announcements have been made!). Launched in 2020 by Prince William and Sir David Attenborough, the first awards were made last year and it will run each year until 2030. The Earthshot prize makes awards in five categories, inspired by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: the restoration and protection of nature, air cleanliness, ocean revival, waste-free living, and climate action. The awards, which are funded by philanthropists and charitable organisations, are made to individuals and groups with inspirational and innovative solutions to the challenges facing the world. Each year, the winner in each of five categories receives a grant of £1 million and support to develop their ideas and scale them up to have maximum impact. Winners come from all parts of the world and all sectors of society. This year's finalists include an indigenous women's group from Australia training rangers to use their ancestral knowledge combined with modern technology in conservation and restoration of the Great Barrier Reef; a woman from Kenya who has developed a cheap clean stove to replace the polluting charcoal burners used widely for cooking across Africa which also cause respiratory illness; a project led by the City of Amsterdam to create a circular economy where there is no waste; three Chemistry students in the UK who have developed a carbon-negative alternative to concrete that could help bring the construction industry to net zero. (Use of concrete has a huge carbon footprint.) As you can probably see, these are all ideas that, once fully developed have the potential to be rolled out across the world, ideas that could be truly life-changing for our planet.

These people are among the prophets of today, people who have a vision for a better future for all. Whether or not they are people of faith, they call us to account, reminding us that we are falling short in our sacred responsibility to care for God's world, reminding us of the need to transform our lives, shaking us out of complacency.

Advent is a time of anticipation of the coming of Light that gives us hope. Prophets remind us that ultimately God's promises will be fulfilled that, despite all the darkness, light will come; and they call us to work towards that. Sometimes today's world doesn't look very hopeful, but prophets also remind us that God can do much with very little. At the beginning of today's reading from Isaiah, we are told 'A shoot will come out from the stock of Jesse.' A shoot is such a tender, fragile sign of hope but with so much potential.