

Reflection for Sunday 29th November: Advent 1: HOPE (Isaiah 11:1-10)

One of our church members contacted me last week and told me that in the church where she grew up in Hungary there is an altar which as far as she knows is unique in the world. It's known as the Jesse Tree altar – hopefully a picture of it will now appear on the screen (SHOW PICTURE). It's beautiful, isn't it?

The idea of the Jesse Tree is an ancient one and derives from the very passage we're looking at today. Isaiah chapter 11 begins: 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit.'

Throughout the history of God's people, **one particular family line had been appointed and anointed by God** – it began with Abraham way back in Genesis 12, then passed through Abraham's son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob. Jacob had 12 sons, and interestingly it was not the famous Joseph through whom the promise ran, but through another son, Judah.

From Judah's line we eventually get to Boaz who married Ruth. Boaz and Ruth raised Obed, who then raised Jesse. And the youngest of Jesse's 8 sons was King David, the greatest of all Israel's kings, and the one who received a promise from God that one day his offspring would possess a throne which would last forever.

Fast forward 3 centuries and here, Isaiah receives a message which confirms what God spoke to King David. The people were still waiting – but the promise remained: 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit.'

The Jesse Tree is a way of showing this great promise – God's family tree passing the line of blessing from one generation to the next... but all waiting for one who would be the greatest of all. It's why some families have a Jesse Tree as their way of celebrating Advent – reading the famous passages of the Old Testament which tell the story of God's promises. We too with our virtual Advent calendar (which starts on Tuesday) will tell this same story, as we wait with hope and expectation in this season.

On the first Sunday of Advent we celebrate the theme of Hope. In particular we celebrate that fact that this Hope was promised to the generations of God's people who watched and waited through the centuries. We celebrate God's goodness and faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the so-called Patriarchs – but then also through the generations that came after them. And let's not forget that Matthew lists Jesus' family tree quite deliberately includes the matriarchs who were also part of this family tree: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and of course Mary.

Our hope is that God keeps his promises – including this great promise made to Isaiah. A new Spirit-filled ruler would come, who would have wisdom, authority and reverence for God; who would judge justly, live righteously and usher in a new age of peace. Ultimately he would be a ruler for all people: as v10 concludes, 'the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.'

To a hard-pressed, anxious people what a promise this must have been. And no less so for us today. **We too begin this season of waiting as much in need of this Saviour as ever.**

It's become a feature of recent years that Advent has been squeezed out by Christmas. We don't really factor in a period of waiting – Christmas starts at some point in October, and runs full pelt from that point onwards. No wonder, perhaps, that our modern Christmas feels so unsatisfying. We've gorged out on it well before we even get to 25th December.

Perhaps the ancient wisdom of waiting is no bad thing for us this year. There is a parallel perhaps with how many of us are now waiting and preparing for long-awaited reunions at Christmas. Others have decided against that, but will prepare to find other ways to mark what will be a unique season. For the first time in a generation our culture is learning what it is like again to wait for something important at Christmas.

So it seems to me that a recovery of hopeful and joyful waiting is precisely the best way to see through the next few weeks of tiers and uncertainty. We need Advent – a real advent of hope, peace, joy and love, as we prepare our hearts and homes for the promised King. As we look at Jesus we see precisely the wisdom, authority and reverence for God that Isaiah predicted. The same justice, righteousness and the restoration of peace to our troubled hearts.

May that coming King be present to us today. **May he fill our hearts with fresh hope.** And may Jesus grant us all grace for a good Advent season as we wait for him with hope and expectation. Amen.