

Sunday 4th December 2022: Advent 2: 'Peace through the true king' (Isaiah 11:1-10)

I'm sure some of you remember the great storm of 1987. That was the one where the weatherman Michael Fish famously said the night before: 'Some of you have contacted me to say there's a hurricane on the way – don't worry, there isn't.' As it happens, those people who contacted Michael Fish were, of course, dead right. The winds blew up to 100 mph and millions of trees were felled overnight. As a 15-year-old at the time, I remember my chief gripe being that our school wasn't cancelled *even the day after a hurricane!* I remember trudging in through school gates over broken branches and muttering about the unfairness of it all.

The great storm had its effect locally, and indeed it brought down one huge tree in the north-east corner of Wavendon Churchyard. A section of the trunk is still there, in fact, rotting away. Thankfully it fell on the church shed, totally demolishing it – if that sounds odd, I say thankfully because it fell on something that was easy to replace, and not on the houses of our two next door neighbours, both of which were in reach, or on the vestry of the church itself.

The remaining stump of this tree was levelled off and left to its own devices. And you can guess what happened next. Over the years, the tree started to grow again. A shoot came up from the stump, a new trunk started to bear fruit. 35 years later, it is a fully flourishing tree again. Recently we've been looking at some clearance work in that area, but this summer we met with the local council and the neighbour whose garden is next to the tree, and we all agreed that, far from cutting it down again, it was the perfect size and shape for where it is. New life has flourished from the old stump.

Our tree is a perfect modern-day example of what Isaiah was talking about in our famous passage for today. As we recalled last week, the bulk of Isaiah is written in a time of national difficulties, punctuated with external threats and internal disobedience. There are a lot of prophecies of judgement: but in the midst of them we get these jewels – like Isaiah 2 last week, like Isaiah 11 today – messages of hope. For all that Israel had strayed from the path God desired for them, and for all that their leadership was often in disarray, **it was *not* the end of the story: 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit.'**

Jesse was the father of King David, the greatest Israelite king of them all to that point. The stump of Jesse was not just a reference to King David, but also a pointed image as to what the nation of Israel had become. As a result, so much of national life was all about looking back sadly to a lost golden age. But here, 300 years later, Isaiah calls the people to look *forward*. For all the troubles of the present age, a great new ruler will come, a ruler who will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord: a Spirit of wisdom and of power, and most crucially of all, who 'will delight in the fear of the Lord.'

Here, the word 'fear' is best understood as awe or reverence: it's not a cringing fear, but rather a zeal for God's name and God's ways, a desire for worship and holiness. Israelite kings were always defined according to one primary metric: either 'they did what was right in the eyes of the Lord' – like Hezekiah in Isaiah's day – or 'they did evil in the eyes of the Lord' like the majority of the others. That one assessment defined everything else. And this new ruler would be the ultimate one who would do 'what was right in the eyes of the Lord', with wisdom and might.

Interestingly, and perhaps you noticed this too, a lot of what comes next is about judgement. The wicked will be judged and as a result those who are oppressed will receive justice. Judgement is one of those themes we don't like to talk about in the church anymore – it sounds too heavy, all about condemnation. But we forget that **true judgement is objective, it's neutral – ultimately it's about putting things right.**

So yes, the bullies and the manipulators and the rampantly greedy get their come-uppance, but those who suffer under their yoke are set free. We need to retain a theology of judgement because, at its heart, judgement is about God putting things right – and how we need to keep hold of that. And this passage tells us that the new ruler is the one through whom all things will eventually be put right.

And this is also the prelude for what comes next. The most famous part of this passage is the lovely section from verses 6-9 which describes what the fulfilment of this new era will be like: all the innate conflict and predatory behaviour will be healed. As it describes in powerful visual imagery: ‘the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat.’

It sounds fanciful, but this is **picture language for what perfect peace looks like**. It takes images which would have been familiar to everyone, which are situations of perpetual conflict and danger, and turns them on their head. I think we’re meant to see them as not just relating to the natural world, but to act as representations of the sort of injustice that was being practised in the culture of the day which was so vividly described in the preceding verses. The wicked oppressing the poor were like wolves preying on lambs. And the point is: when this new ruler ushers in the new kingdom, this kind of thing simply will not be allowed to happen any more.

The fact that the text of Isaiah’s vision appears in the order it does is the other reason why retaining a theology of justice and judgement is so important. **It was Martin Luther King who said: ‘Without justice, there can be no peace.’ True peace can only happen when justice is served** – and that remains just as true today as ever, as the existence of the International Criminal Court at the Hague prosecuting war crimes demonstrates. Then, as now, until the new Spirit-filled king restores justice, peace remains elusive.

So what do we make of all this today? First, we have to acknowledge that **we live in what you might call ‘in-between times’**. Yes, Christ the King has come! But his reign is yet only established in part – the fullness remains to be seen. But on this second Sunday of Advent, we take the chance to remind ourselves that this new ruler is the Prince of Peace, and that central to his mission is the restoration of peace on every level – with God, with ourselves, with others, and even with creation. What we experience in part now will be the reality in time to come.

Second, that **because the restoration of justice and peace is fundamental to the rule of this new king, then it remains fundamental to us as well**. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers,’ says the Prince of Peace, ‘for they shall be called children of God.’ With so much injustice and violence in the world, even today, we are called to be bringers of peace, wherever God grants us grace to do so.

Finally, **we can rejoice that we know who this prophecy refers to**. The people of Isaiah’s day did not – they had to wait, and hope. But today, we can wait and hope with the certainty of knowing *when* this little child would come, who lead us into this reign of peace. As this child grows up, he knows that his mission is to exercise the true and just judgement through which – and only through which – peace can be restored; and even more amazingly, he is able to enact this judgement in his own body on the cross – where perfect justice and perfect peace-giving mercy meet.

In that day, as the text concludes, his resting place will be glorious. The world didn’t see it at the time, he died condemned and despised, but Isaiah knew that from that point, the nations would rally to him. We, too, today, come to this same resting place, we too long for the miracle of peace on earth as it is in heaven, and we, too, say today: O come, o come, Emmanuel. Amen.