

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – First Sunday of Advent (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **Isaiah 1: 1-20**
 Psalm 25: 1-10, (11-22)
 Matthew 21: 1-13

Welcome to the new Lectionary Year and readings for the First Sunday in Advent.

Over the four Sundays in Advent our Old Testament readings take us to four different Books of the Bible – Isaiah, 1 Kings, Malachi, Zechariah – and the words of four prophets.

We begin with Isaiah and the vision that is given in chapter 1 of Isaiah – A vision (singular?) that Isaiah saw during the reign of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah; all described as kings of Judah. Perhaps it refers to a recurring vision as the reign of these, father succeeded by son, kings covers a total period of approximately 100 years.

Some scholars believe there were at least three different (proto-, deuter-, trito-) authors carrying the name ‘Isaiah’.

Even if this is the case, the vision described appears in chapter 1 and would likely have been written by the ‘proto-Isaiah’, unless edited much later.

Uzziah was initially a ‘righteous’ and prosperous king who in later life became proud and even attempted to burn incense in the Holy of Holies; an act which led to him being afflicted with leprosy. His son, Jotham is described as a ‘righteous’ king but his son, Ahaz ‘did evil in the sight of the Lord’. Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, was however ‘righteous’ in the sight of the Lord.

For three chapters the prophet brings condemnation on Judah but in chapters four and five there is promise of a different future. In chapter six we find the second ‘great’ vision received by Isaiah. The other week we mentioned memories of an event, locked into time and place. This is one of those – Isaiah tells us that the vision takes place in the Temple; in the year that king Uzziah died. It is life changing for him (‘woe to me I have seen the King’) and becomes his commission:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’
And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’

We return to the vision in chapter 1. In the NIV it is given a heading - “**A rebellious nation**”.

The Lord declares that Israel is His, but they have turned to their own ways. He makes a comparison with domestic animals – these ‘know’ their owners, but ‘intelligent’ man has deserted the Lord.

Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken:
‘I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.
³The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.’

After asking why they should desert and rebel against the Lord, He spells out the consequences of their action.

Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. ⁶From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness – only wounds and bruises and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.

⁷Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.

⁸Daughter Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege.

⁹Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.

Sodom and Gomorrah, together with Admah, Zeboim, and Bela, were known as “the cities of the plain” located on the Jordan plain in Southern Canaan.

Was it the rich agricultural land that led to easy living and subsequent ignoring of the Lord? If so, is there a moral and is there a warning for us, living in twenty-first Century materialistic Western Culture?

Sodom is best known for the account (in Genesis) of Lot fleeing the city before its destruction; his wife looking back, contrary to instructions, and being turned into a pillar of salt. You will remember that Abraham had given his nephew the option of the easy living of the plain or the harder living of the hill country. Lot had chosen the former, hence his presence in Sodom.

Consulting an exhaustive concordance we find, in fact, 47 references (38 in OT, 9 in NT) to Sodom and 23 (19 in OT, 4 in NT) to Gomorrah. There are also references to these cities in the Books of the Apocrypha, the Quran and another Islamic source – Hadith.

Matthew records that Jesus denounced cities that had ignored Him: (chapter 11)

²⁰Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ²¹‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

²²But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.

²³And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades.

For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in **Sodom**, it would have remained to this day.

²⁴But I tell you that it will be more bearable for **Sodom** on the day of judgment than for you.’

The complaint of Jesus against these cities where He had ministered is so similar to the Lord’s complaint through Isaiah of ‘people doing their own thing’ – only being concerned with what interests and is of profit to them.

Returning to Isaiah's vision we read the Lord's word on the sacrifices that are nominally presented to Him. He wants an end to meaningless offerings and issues a challenge to the people of Judah:

¹⁶ Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong.

¹⁷ Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.

The passage chosen for the Lectionary Reading ends, however, with a promise of redemption – but a warning that this will only be available to the willing and obedient; rebels will perish.

¹⁸ 'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.'

¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land;

²⁰ but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.'

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The Lord offers to each one of us a way to Him through Jesus – our Advocate with the Father – but He has also given to each of us the gift of free-will; we like the inhabitants of Judah and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, have the option of being willing and obedient or taking the 'rebel' self-centred way. The choice rests with us – let us pray that we all find the way the Lord would have us go.

Last week we thought about the end of King David's life and his last recorded words. Today we read a Psalm of David!

– I suppose that is not unexpected given the number of Psalms that are attributed to his pen.

This is another Psalm which is in the form of an acrostic poem – each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Its content is typical of the writing of David. He makes a clear statement of **his trust in the Lord** then requests that he will not regret that trust. The subject is widened to all people – those who trust the Lord and those who do not.

¹ In you, LORD my God, I put my trust.

² I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. ³ No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame,

but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause.

David then goes on to ask that the Lord reveals His ways and His paths; that he may be guided in the Lord's truth. Again there is the expression of the hope David has in the Lord – all day long. We find in the NIV translation the description of the Lord as 'God my Saviour' – a description that we would perhaps reserve for Jesus (who is of course the completion of David's line). David asks the Lord to forget the sins of his youth, the times he was rebellious, to remember instead his ongoing mercy and love.

We are reminded that the Lord cares for those who follow his covenant:

¹⁰ All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.

In verses 11-22 (the optional part of the reading) we continue to see the Lord's relationship with His people and also His individual relationship with David. The culminating verses of the Psalm see David appealing to the Lord, primarily for himself but also for Israel:

¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

¹⁷ Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish.

¹⁸ Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.

¹⁹ See how numerous are my enemies and how fiercely they hate me!

²⁰ Guard my life and rescue me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.

²¹ May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, LORD, is in you.

²² Deliver Israel, O God, from all their troubles!

A strange Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent – the triumphal ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday!

Then we reflect – Advent is that time when we prepare for the coming of Jesus; when we remember all the Old Testament prophecies about this "Son of David"; we begin that process today. At several points in the Gospels we read that Jesus told His disciples they were going to Jerusalem and what would happen to Him once they were there: (Matthew 20)

⁷ Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them,

¹⁸ 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.

On the third day he will be raised to life!'

In Luke's account of the Transfiguration we read that Jesus was discussing his departure and its fulfilment in Jerusalem with Moses and Elijah. This was to be the culmination of God's Plan for mankind. It was to be the apex of the pyramid constructed on the Law and the Prophets.

It is therefore fitting that we should read the events of Holy Week at the beginning of Advent.

It would appear that Jesus had made some ‘quiet’ preparations for His entry into Jerusalem – if the disciples collecting the donkey and her colt were challenged they were to say “the Lord needs them” – Luke tells us that they were indeed challenged when taking the colt (no donkey mentioned), were able to bring the animal to Jesus and this (Matthew tells us) enabled a prophecy of Zechariah to be fulfilled:

⁴This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵‘Say to Daughter Zion, “See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

All four of the Gospels give an account of the Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem. Each writer remembers it in a slightly different way to the others – a donkey and a colt or a colt alone; Palm branches or just branches etc?

Some critics have tried to use these differences as evidence for fabricated fiction rather than support for an eye-witness account. If a number of us were giving our account of an event we had watched would we all say exactly the same? I have sometimes used a visual aid in a Palm Sunday service – a large polystyrene ball, one hemisphere painted green the other orange. It is carefully presented to the congregation who are asked to say what they see - some reply a single colour ball, others a two colour ball. Both are correct –depending on the point from which the ball was viewed.

So begins that momentous week when Jesus confronts the religious authorities; a week in which, on the first day, the ecstatic crowd sing His praises declaring Him to be the “Son of David” and the blessed one who comes “in the name of the Lord”; a week during which the same crowd were swayed and turned – braying for His death by its end.

Although Jesus had told His disciples what would happen - particularly that He would be raised to life on the third day – it was only with the benefit of hindsight that they began to understand what God had done. Salvation is granted through the Cross and the Resurrection – it took the disciples some time to appreciate this and even when they had, they were still fearful men, not yet empowered by the Spirit to take the Gospel message to the entire known world.

A postscript for 2020 when the media discussion is all about easing any ‘lock-down’ to enable families to “celebrate” Christmas.

May we pray that the true meaning of the festival finds its way to the fore. There has been a suggestion that many people are turning to live-streamed services in these days – let us pray that many **are** seeking the message we offer and that the increased numbers are not entirely the result of “channel” hopping by various church members.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Hark! All the tribes Hosanna! cry:
O Saviour meek, pursue Thy road
With palms and scattered garments strowed.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
O Christ, Thy triumphs now begin
O'er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
The winged squadrons of the sky
Look down with sad and wondering eyes
To see the approaching sacrifice.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Thy last and fiercest strife is nigh:
The Father on his sapphire throne
Expects His own anointed Son.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, Thy power, and reign.

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