

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

Lectionary Readings: **Zechariah 2: 10-13**
 Psalm 113
 Luke 1: 39-55

The fourth Sunday of Advent and the words of the prophet Zechariah join those of Isaiah, Micaiah and Malachi.

Zechariah and the contemporaneous prophet Haggai ministered to the ‘Exiles’ who had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. At the beginning of the book of Haggai we read:

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest:

The beginning of Zechariah:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo:

The two prophets brought the ‘Word of the Lord’ at the same time – both exhorting the returnees to complete the building of a “House for the Lord”; you will remember that initial work had been opposed and then abandoned after the foundations were laid.

Background notes to Zechariah are given in the NIV Study Bible:

Like Jeremiah (1:1) and Ezekiel (1:3), Zechariah was not only a prophet (1:1) but also a priest. He was born in Babylonia and was among those who returned to Judah in 538 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua (his grandfather Iddo is named among the returnees in Nehemiah 12:4). At a later time, when Joiakim was high priest, Zechariah apparently succeeded Iddo as head of that priestly family (Nehemiah 12:10-16). Since the grandson succeeded the grandfather, it has been suggested that the father (Berekiah, 1:7) died at an early age. Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai (Ezra 5:1; 6:14) but continued his ministry long after him..... His young age (see 2:4) in the early period of his ministry makes it possible that he ministered even into the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.).

In the first part of his book Zechariah describes a series of Eight Visions, seen in one night:

The Horseman among the Myrtle trees
The Four Horns and the Four Craftsmen
A man with a measuring line (chapter 2)
Clean Garments for the High Priest
The Gold Lampstand and the Two Olive Trees
The Flying Scroll
The Woman in the Basket
The Four Chariots

The reading today comes from the third of these visions – the Man with the Measuring Line – it is found at the beginning of chapter 2:

¹Then I looked up, and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand.

²I asked, “Where are you going?” He answered me, “To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is.”

³While the angel who was speaking to me was leaving, another angel came to meet him ⁴and said to him: ‘Run, tell that young man, “Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of people and animals in it.

⁵And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,” declares the LORD, “and I will be its glory within.”

⁶‘Come! Come! Flee from the land of the north,’ declares the LORD, ‘for I have scattered you to the four winds of heaven,’ declares the LORD.

⁷‘Come, Zion! Escape, you who live in Daughter Babylon!’ ⁸For this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘After the Glorious One has sent me against the nations that have plundered you – for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye –

⁹I will surely raise my hand against them so that their slaves will plunder them. Then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me.

The first angel was able to give an explanation for the measuring line but it required the arrival of the second angel to give an explanation. The first angel was going to measure Jerusalem, limited by its walls; the message brought by the second is that so many people will live in the restored Jerusalem that it will have no walls or will have expanded past them.

Kenneth Barker (executive director of the NIV Translation Centre, the International Bible Society) comments on this verse: *“The promise is given that Jerusalem will become so large and prosperous that it will expand beyond its walls. Indeed, it will overflow so much that it will be as though it had no walls. Evidently many of its people and animals will have to live in the surrounding un-walled villages (cf. Ezekiel 38:11). Nothing like this has yet happened in the history of the city. The realization of the full scope of this prophecy must therefore still be in a future earthly kingdom.”*

The Lord will be “a wall of fire around it” – reminiscent of the ‘protecting’ columns of fire and smoke that accompanied the Israelites as they journeyed in the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Lord is calling back to Jerusalem those who remained in the Babylonian exile (land of the north). There was also a diaspora – God’s people scattered to “the four corners of the earth”, not just exiled in Babylon; they too were called back to the city.

Today's reading from chapter 2 (verses 10-13) mark a change of emphasis.

The prophet says "'Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. **For I am coming, and I will live among you,' declares the LORD.**" The statements made by the Lord, through the prophet, speak of the Messianic Age.

"Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people."

We are reminded: (a) of God's promise to Abram when called to leave his home city, Ur of the Chaldeans; and (b) words of Jesus foretelling the ultimate effect of His crucifixion.

In Genesis 12 we read:

'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

In John's Gospel (chapter 3) Jesus is in conversation with Nicodemus and towards the end he refers to the time when the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, are suffering a plague of venomous snakes. They are 'saved' from death after being bitten by looking at the raised 'bronze snake' (Numbers 21):

'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things?
¹¹Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.
¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?
¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.
¹⁴**Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,** ¹⁵**that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'**

Jesus makes a similar statement later in John's Gospel (chapter 12) – a statement that is tied even more closely with the prophecy of Zechariah:

Jesus predicts his death

²⁰Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. 'Sir,' they said, 'we would like to see Jesus.' ²²Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

²⁷'Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name!'

Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' ²⁹The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰Jesus said, 'This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³²**And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'**

³³He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

³⁴The crowd spoke up, 'We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain for ever, so how can you say, "The Son of Man must be lifted up"? Who is this "Son of Man"?''

³⁵Then Jesus told them, 'You are going to have the light just a little while longer. **Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going.** ³⁶**Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.'** When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.

Just as the 'New Jerusalem', larger than the city determined by the 'measuring-line', is a vision for the future so is the drawing of the nations to the crucified Jesus.

We conclude our thoughts on the Zechariah passage by pondering the beginning of the final verse:

Be still before the LORD, all mankind,

The appointed Psalm is the whole of number 113, short when compared with some of the others!

It begins and ends with an injunction; an exhortation to the people – **"Praise the Lord"**. A footnote, in the NIV, reminds us of the anglicised form of the original Hebrew words – **"Hallelu Yah"**, which is obviously the source of our word "Hallelujah".

That best known of all the choruses from Handel's Messiah - bringing Part 2 to a magnificent conclusion - starts with **ten Hallelujahs**. Ten times the choir declaim **"Praise the Lord"**!

Having declared that **"The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ"** and that **"He shall reign for ever and ever, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS"**, the chorus concludes with a **further five Hallelujahs**.

Verses 1-3 of the Psalm continue the theme of praising the Lord:

Praise the LORD, you his servants; praise the name of the LORD.

² Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and for evermore.

³ From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised.

The succeeding three proclaim the nature of God and the final verses tell of the works of the Lord before concluding with the final *“Praise the Lord”*:

⁴ The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.

⁵ Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,

⁶ who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?

⁷ He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap;

⁸ he seats them with princes, with the princes of his people.

⁹ He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children.

Praise the LORD.

We see the concerns of the Lord for His people – the poor are lifted and equated with the leaders of the land. There is concern for the childless woman, established as a happy mother. (In 2020/21 this may not of course always be the desired outcome.)

In Deuteronomy (chapter 15) we have the teaching, received from the Lord when Moses went for the second time onto the ‘Mountain of the Lord’, and then delivered to the Israelites. It includes the following instruction:

The year for cancelling debts

¹ At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. ² This is how it is to be done: every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the LORD’s time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed. ³ You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your fellow Israelite owes you. ⁴ However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. ⁶ For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you.

⁷ If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards them. ⁸ Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need. ⁹ Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: ‘The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near,’ so that you do not show ill will towards the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰ Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

We also remember the time when Jesus was eating with His disciples and the woman came and poured an alabaster jar of expensive perfume over Him – the recorded reaction of the disciples and the subsequent words of Jesus: (Matthew 26)

⁶ While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, ⁷ a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table.

⁸ When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. ‘Why this waste?’ they asked. ⁹ ‘This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.’

¹⁰ Aware of this, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

¹¹ **The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.** ¹² When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.’

Living as we are in the Covid-19 pandemic we are aware of increasing difficulties, particularly financial, for many, many people; especially for those who have been made redundant or to a lesser extent those who have been furloughed. How are we, as a Christian Church, as individual Christians, reacting to the situation we find around us? Our Psalm points us to God’s concern for His people; the Law given to Moses by the Lord provided a practical blueprint for living; but we remember the Psalm commenced and concluded with *“Praise to the Lord”*.

May we see and respond to the things we need to do but always have at the centre of our lives, that praise to the Lord which the Psalmist ‘demands’.

No Epistle on this fourth Sunday of Advent – our Gospel reading is the straightforward account of Mary going to visit her ‘old-age’ (Luke 1: 36) relative Elizabeth and the reaction of the latter, under the influence of the Holy Spirit:

⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵ **Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!**

This last verse could equally apply to Elizabeth for believing and accepting (in contrast to her husband, Zechariah) the Lord’s promise or to Mary in accepting the message given to her by the angel Gabriel.

This passage is only recorded in Luke's Gospel and concludes, of course, with the magnificent words of the Magnificat.

Timothy Dudley-Smith has expressed these in his well-known hymn:

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his Name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age to same;
his holy Name--the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

Timothy Dudley-Smith

Based on the *Magnificat*

Submitted by Eric Brown