

5 December 2010

Advent 2A

Sermon notes:

Isaiah 11.1-10

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse”

Isaiah 11.1

Isaiah speaks this morning to a dire time in the history of Israel. It's not clear just what time it is – possibly the end of the 8th century BC, after the northern Hebrew tribes had been scattered by the Assyrians, or possibly the middle of the 6th century BC after the Babylonians had taken the southern tribes into exile. But whatever the case of the historical context of the original prophecy, the image is stark, and clear enough: what remains of Israel is much the same as what remains of a felled tree – a mere stump.

The prophet's word, however, does not simply state the obvious – that Israel is reduced to a shadow of its former self, but goes on to speak of a shoot which springs forth from the stump. This is a phenomenon which is familiar to any gardener, or to anyone who has observed the effects of a bushfire after a few months. That a tree is reduced to a stump is not the end of its story. Many types of trees are highly resilient, and will send forth saplings if the main trunk is cut down.

Yet, the real contrast Isaiah draws here is not between the stump and the shoot, but in fact between the stump and the *Spirit*. Any stump might send forth a shoot – this is a natural process. But Isaiah speaks not just of any new branch. Of this one it is said:

Isaiah 11.2 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.

The new shoot itself is the sign of God's faithfulness, that the promises made to David about there always being a descendant of his on the throne are still to be kept; it is from the stump of *Jesse* – David's father – that this new shoot will spring forth. But the new thing in the prophecy is the gift of the Spirit of God, with such effect as the text describes.

Advent is often characterised as the time of waiting. It is not waiting in the sense that a child waits for the day of Santa, and it is also not

waiting in the sense that we await the birth of Jesus – for that is already in our distant past.

For what, then, do we wait? The answer – or one way of putting the answer – is perhaps surprising: we await the coming of the one who brings the Holy Spirit. Or, perhaps more simply, we wait for the gift of the Spirit itself. This is something we usually mark in the middle of year, according to Luke's calendar, on the festival of Pentecost. But the interest in the gift of the Spirit is present at the start of Jesus' ministry. As John the Baptist addresses the crowds who come to the bank of the Jordan for the purposes of being baptised, he draws a contrast between himself and “the one who is coming after” him – Jesus. Whereas John himself baptises with water, Jesus will baptise “with the Holy Spirit and with fire”. The same point is made by Mark and Luke in their gospels. The thing which sets Jesus apart is not simply Jesus himself – which usually means for us his morality, or his spiritual insight, or some other possession he has in himself. The thing which sets Jesus apart is the Spirit which animates him, and that he will be a source of that Spirit for everyone else.

Advent is a waiting not simply upon Jesus, but on the Jesus who bears the Spirit of God, and who gives that Spirit. But the talk of the Spirit makes it sound as if this is all a “religious” concern – a matter of what we commonly call today “spirituality”. It is, in fact, much more worldly than this. The Spirit of the God of Israel is proclaimed as the source of life over against *other* spirits which are active in our lives already. These other spirits are the motivators which cause us to act as we normally do, the promises which we believe to be reliable. What we sometimes call the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the age – can in fact be many things for many people. But the point of Isaiah's prophecy is the impotence of these spirits of the ages to usher in a true and lasting peace.

Our lives and our society are peppered with the “stumps” of dreams which did not flourish but which nevertheless throw up new shoots which seem to promise more. Perhaps the change of a government is a particularly clear example, or the arrival of new gadget which will, finally, be everything we ever needed, and more. Green-shoot developments like these are important for the progress of our society, but they don't, in the end, change *us*. Whether it is in our own minds and hearts against ourselves, or in our politics and morals against each other, we remain divided. For the shoots which spring from the stumps of our failures are always from the same stock, and so bear the same fruit in the end.

But here Isaiah sees a different force at work: the same frail human stock but now animated and moved by a different spirit – God's own life.

Isaiah speaks here to our deepest longings – the reconciliation of the enmities which we can't shake off – indeed enmities to which we even have become so accustomed that they seem to us to be necessary. For, to borrow from Isaiah's imagery, what else can a wolf do but kill the lamb, or the snake do but bite the child? What else can the strong do but exploit the weak, or the rich do but keep the poor at a distance? What else can the self-righteous do but look down on others, or the divided mind do but destroy itself?

Yet, despite this deathly realism, what else do we long for but Isaiah's "holy mountain" on which "they will not hurt or destroy", where all that is divided is reconciled? John the Baptist proclaims that this "holy mountain" becomes Jesus himself, on whom rests the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Our waiting is upon the gift of that Spirit, and on the fruit it will bring: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5.22f) – the life which is Christ himself.

And our work in waiting is to train ourselves in these qualities, looking for their perfection in us by God, becoming signs of the promised peace which God alone can bring and which will bring all peoples to him for wholeness and healing.

As the church has long prayed, then, so we pray again today – come quickly, Lord Jesus, and fill us with your Spirit of peace. Amen.