

Third Sunday of Advent 15 Dec 2013



Isaiah 35: 1-10
The Song of Mary - Magnificat
James 5: 7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

We continue to explore Isaiah's vision as we continue our preparations and our movement toward Christmas....

The closer we come to the nativity the more it seems to speak to us and the more it asks of us... That is if we can see beyond the Christmas card version of the story.

In the Hebraic tradition, the worldview and understanding of the people of Israel see Isaiah's vision as pointing to a future

Illustration 1: Advent 1

Messiah and of course there are many schools of thought within that tradition as to who/what the Messiah might look like.

The literal translation of the Hebrew word *moshiach* (messiah) is "anointed," and the Greek translation of Messiah is *khristos* (χριστος), anglicized as *Christ*, and so we commonly refer to Jesus as either the "Christ" or the "Messiah."

When we hear Isaiah, we are already listening with this context as a given, and that actually gives shape to what we hear.. *"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;*

We can so easily see this as pointing to Jesus, and so see Jesus as the predicted 'Messiah' of the Hebrew tradition.

The gospel today gives us an account of John the Baptist questioning if Jesus is the predicted Messiah, however at the outset of the narrative Matthew has already made up his mind: *"When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?""*

Matthew's gospel is very much initially written for a Jewish audience and he really does want to underline the understanding that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Matthew wants to ensure a continuity with the Jewish faith tradition, he wants to understand Jesus within what is his own faith tradition, just a Jesus himself taught within that tradition...

We know that process very well ourselves, it is almost a unconscious instinct to want to hold on to what we have and to what we know...

However prophetic voices and insights are quite different for they see, and seek to see what is beyond that obvious, unconscious instinctive worldview.. Prophets point toward a new creation and so seek not to hold on, but rather to become empty (the activity of giving) so that we might be free to grasp the unseen, another worldview, a new creation that is the reality of Divine promise.

The cultural context in which the Scriptures were formed and then interpreted still has a significant influence on our reading of them, and perhaps it is that very influence that impedes their fullest, or even fuller, understanding.

If we look at Isaiah without the influence of that past interpretation we can also see reference to: *“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way”*

So there are two, at least, reference points for interpretation, one is the “He” that will come and the other is *“A highway”* a Holy Way on which we are to travel....

The concept of a one-man personal saviour, the Messiah, is a simple, almost wishful, understanding of an illustration used by Isaiah; however it denies the full mystical insight of Isaiah’s prophesy and it fails to account for the other reference point in the same prophesy; *“the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.”*

Isaiah sees a way forward and it is a path to be travelled... that is a very different dynamic to the orthodox alternative of sitting, pew-like, waiting for the anointed one to come to the rescue.

Advent is the time when the wise-ones set out on the journey, following a star, a heavenly sign, they travel on a *Holy Way*; they don’t sit and wait for the birth of a king who will come to them.

John the Baptist wants to know if Jesus is Isaiah’s proclaimed Messiah, he sends his own disciples to ask the question: *“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”*

In the context of the orthodox understanding we might expect some obvious responses..
Yes I am the Messiah – the waiting is over...
No I am not the Messiah, so keep waiting

However the response from Jesus seems more aligned to Isaiah’s other reference point, *“the Holy Way”*; for he says:
“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me. ”

The response is one of action, activity; it is an illustration of participating in the creation that was Isaiah’s vision. Prophetic vision does not point toward a future ‘New creation’, rather it is an insight into the bringing about of a ‘New creation’.

In the beginning, our birth, is in the image of God, and our way is the realisation, the fullest realisation of that reality....

The scriptures are a reference point (a mirror for reflection) for our living, our seeing and our movement, our growing into fullness.

During Advent and in our celebration of Christmas as we look deeper into the mystery of all that we seek to celebrate, we find ourselves threading and weaving the mystery of Easter into the same tapestry of life.. and we have an opportunity to see, as Isaiah saw, that life is very much reflected in these ancient narratives.

As we are here planning our celebration, we, and it is the same we, are also involved in other stories in other places....

As I'm sitting writing the liturgy of the nativity for midnight mass, the thread is broken with a call from Nepal, and Raja also emailed me details of another story: It is the story of a boy, his name is Ali and he is 16 months old.

According to police he was hung by his mother because his mother had an affair with other guy who was not ready to take responsibility of her child. Ali's father is alcoholic and left them one year back. Ali was hanged on tree and because of that his brain got damaged and he needs special care like our three girls at SERC.

A boy tied to a tree, the nativity child on the Easter cross.

We agreed to help.... And as I went back to the liturgy of midnight mass, so the story unfolds....

The next call was following a visit by Raja to the mother who is being held in prison by the police. Ali has two siblings, a 6 year old and a 4 year old; we looked at the options and the possibilities and the vision we came to was of bringing the whole family back together; seeing if we could take responsibility for the mother and all three children so that all might have an opportunity , a new creation. When we agreed on the actions that need to be undertaken, I commented to Raja, that perhaps this is the Holy family for us this Christmas.. And for us, perhaps this is us walking the Holy Way that Isaiah points us toward.

John the Baptist over the last two Sundays has shown us a new way and calls us to participate in a new creation. However, the last line of today's gospel sets a context for us in relation to John: *"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

John, as great as he was, only pointed the way to an even greater reality.

At Christmas we will celebrate *"the word became flesh"* – the future is enfleshed in what we actually do, and what we participate in today.