

# Second Sunday In Advent 2 December 2016

[Isaiah 11: 1-10 ; Psalm 72: 1 - 7, 18 – 21; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3:1-12](#) from Vanderbilt

[Advent 2A December 4, 2016](#) Textweek

The first reading from Isaiah gives us an early version of what has recently developed into a whole industry with 'ancestry.com' as a preeminent leader; the industry of lineage and family trees.

The Isaiah reading has given rise to the tradition of the "Jesse Tree" as the family tree of Jesus:

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD."

The Tree of Jesse became a well-used depiction in art of the ancestors of Christ, shown in a tree which rises from Jesse of Bethlehem, the father of King David and it is the earliest use of the 'family tree' as a schematic representation of a genealogy. The various figures depicted in the lineage of Jesus are drawn from those names listed in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke.

Luke's is a more complete lineage giving 77 generations from Jesus back through David and Jesse all the way back to Adam and so to God. This comprehensive ancestral lineage was maintained by the early church to emphasise both the authority of Jesus and his true lineage with the Hebrew tradition in order to illuminate him as the expected Messiah.

For those early, uneducated and primitive peoples such teachings became the foundations of their faith and so too a credible understanding of the religious authority that governed their lives.

Today, we might with some embarrassment, ask why these primitive teachings have not been more critically analysed; and question for ourselves why the Church, even today, seeks to promote such understandings as foundational truths.

It can be argued that holding on to such simplistic understandings, holding on to these unenlightened traditions, has rendered the whole religious process empty and that in turn has given rise to a predominantly secular society.

By holding on to a lineage of Jesus that goes back through the Old Testament to Adam and Eve, is like believing that when we sing "Rudolph the red nose reindeer" we actually believe that a reindeer called Rudolf had a shiny red nose....

And when we question such traditions, we do feel some trepidation, for what we are actually acknowledging is that the gospels are not necessarily 'gospel'.

The trepidation of questioning our faith and our tradition might be more clearly understood when we see it as a fear of questioning ourselves, and our own reference points for belief, purpose and life itself; and rightly we might be afraid to engage such questions.

However, we should at least have the strength to acknowledge our fear, and accept that we have therefore chosen a future of deception, delusion and one that leaves the enlightenment of Christ in the shadows of a more primitive tradition, the very tradition that Jesus himself saw beyond.

Within the second reading there are two lines of encouragement for us to face our fears:

“4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

“8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

These two lines encourage us to look for the instruction of ‘hope’ in the Scriptures, and also tell us that Christ sought to confirm a truth that went beyond the circumcised, the old tradition, into the fullness of a new universal understanding that would also embrace the gentiles, and so a new tradition.

And so when we revisit Isaiah, without trepidation, we might read with same sense of wonder that some of us have recently encountered T.S Elliot; we might look for a prophetic and poetic voice, a voice that gives utterance from the place of prayer, the place of Divine truth that is within us all.

Let’s hear again the voice of Isaiah:

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might.....

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.....

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

This is not a voice of foretelling the future, this is not a voice that proposes a continuation of an unenlightened tradition, it is a voice that takes us beyond the everyday into a new vision of our reality.

And now listen to T.S.Elliot, where we can hear the same voice, a voice from the place of prayer a place from where we see beyond the usual:

That was a way of putting it - not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
With words and meanings.

There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been.

Isaiah quite rightly is our reference point for Advent, for he opens for us a new vision, he invites a nativity, a birth in us that will take us beyond the knowledge derived from experience, that place of knowing that imposes a pattern, and falsifies.

That very same invitation is uttered again in the figure of John the Baptist;  
"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness",  
uttering from the place of prayer.

And in today's gospel we are encouraged to

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The original Greek word we have translated as repent (μετανοέω) had the meaning

"changed after being with" as in "I repent, change my mind, change the inner landscape of my being"

As we engage the Advent journey we are being challenged toward our nativity... we are being invited into a new vision for the future.

We are asked to consider that when we sing "Once in royal David city", there never was a "once" and that the reign of King David is not our true foundation, rather, our truest foundation will be found in tomorrow, not yesterday.

It sounds complicated by the reality is really quite simple;

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor."

And final words to T.S.Elliot:

You say I am repeating  
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.  
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,  
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know

And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not.

Peter Humphris