

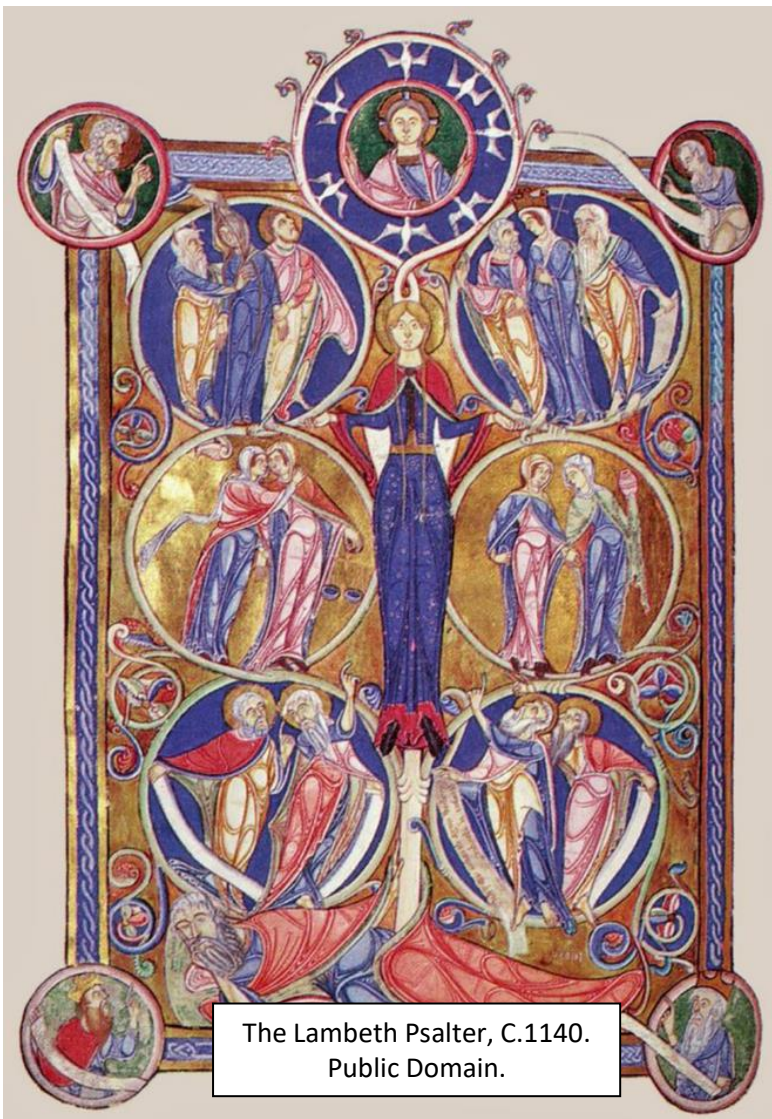
Sermon

The Jesse Tree

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

2nd Sunday of Advent: 8th December 2019

© 2019 The Revd Ian Hardcastle



The Lambeth Psalter, C.1140.
 Public Domain.

I have said we are in the season of Advent. Advent from Latin *adventus* means coming towards, arrival or approach. So our focus is on the approach of Christ. Today, the second Sunday, it is on the coming rule of Christ which will be one of peace.

Tree of Jesse

I wonder if you are familiar with the Jesse Tree. It became very popular in medieval art starting from the late 11th Century. It is a depiction of the descent of Christ based on the metaphor we heard in Isaiah 11. It is the first known graphic of a family tree. So if you are into genealogy, your diagrams are based on the idea from the Jesse tree and Isaiah 11. In fact all the hierarchical tree diagrams stem from there too.

Why Jesse? Jesse was the father of King David and God promised David that he would raise up a dynasty from him with a great descendent the Messiah. Jesse was the grandson of Boaz and Ruth whose story you probably know from the Book of Ruth. Boaz was in turn the son of Rahab the woman who protected the spies going into Jericho when Joshua was leading the Hebrews into the

Promised Land. And he was the great, great, great, great, great (5 greats) grandson of Judah. Judah was one of the sons of Jacob and a great grandson of Abraham.

By Isaiah's time the royal line was about to be cut off in judgement. The exile was coming and the Kings would be killed or dethroned. So this tree of Jesse would be cut down – only a stump would remain.

You will all have seen regrowth from a stump. New shoots form and the life of the tree bursts forth again. I have heard that in Ancient Greece it was illegal to dig up the stump of an olive tree because it might grow again. So it is with this family tree a new shoot or branch will spring up from the old stock. This fresh shoot is the future Messiah.

This is a repeated theme in the Old Testament; it occurs in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah. When Isaiah prophesied the crucifixion, he wrote that the Messiah grew up like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground. ¹

Jeremiah twice wrote of God raising up a righteous branch from David's line who would do what is just and right in the land. ²

Who is this King of glory?

Isaiah tells us that the Spirit of God would rest on the Messiah. Just so, at his baptism, John saw the Spirit descend and remain on Jesus. Then we are told more: This Spirit is the Spirit of Yahweh, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. These are often represented by seven doves on the Jesse tree.

The Messiah has the Spirit of Yahweh. He is invested with wisdom, understanding and counsel. He is given knowledge, power and awe or fear of the Lord.

This ruler has all the good qualities you want. But even better he grants us his Holy Spirit too. Do we display those qualities too: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, power and fear of the Lord? Just as we need to repent from the negatives so we want to turn towards the positives. These are qualities one could pray for: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, power and the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord will help to keep us obedient and desiring him above other things. It is the beginning of wisdom. ³

If we are wise, or if we would be wise, we should seek to grow in the fear of the Lord. It is the key to knowledge, wisdom and salvation. Not a craven fear – but a deep respect, a reverence, an awe which makes one want to obey and please.

Then Isaiah tells us what the Messiah's reign will be like in the Last Days. He will establish a reign of peace where old enmities are laid down. Isaiah speaks of carnivores at peace with their prey – the bear and the calf, the lion and the lamb. Some take it as a literal picture of that future state. Others see it as figurative with the animals representing human characteristics. Either would be a miracle actually! But the main point is that Eden is restored and (v9) "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Isaiah also tells us about the nature of the king: he is just, righteous, faithful and peaceable. When he will judge, it will be with righteousness and justice. Wrongs will be stopped. He is clothed in righteousness and faithfulness. ⁴

In Matthew 3, we hear the announcement of the coming King. The Kingdom of God is near, because the King himself is near. John the Baptist calls people to be ready for the coming King.

When a VIP comes to visit, there is a certain amount of preparation and tidying up so things look at their best when he arrives. Recently Prince Charles visited New Zealand - you can be sure that any hosts cleaned up the mess and any dirty corners - that is a human response.

Is that all John the Baptist was looking for? No, of course, he was going deeper. It wasn't outward appearance but the state of the people's hearts that concerned him. He called them to repentance – to turn from their sins. And this repentance was to make a difference in their lives.

We also are called to repent. Whatever is out of line with the rule of Christ needs to change. We need to examine ourselves and make the hard decision to change where we are disobedient to Christ's ways. That might be to do with wrong acts or behaviours. It might be our failure to believe who he is and do the positive things he calls us to. It might be, for example, a refusal to exercise faith!

¹ Isaiah 53:2. See also Isaiah 4:2

² Jer 23:5, 33:15. See also Zechariah 3:8

³ Ps 111:10; Pr 9:10, 15:33

⁴ Is 11:5

However, as Christians we do not go it alone – the Holy Spirit helps us. We are to live by faith just as we were saved by faith. God wants and expects us to ask for his help to live his way.

So we look back to Jesus' first coming. Then he gave us the example and the choice to follow him. He dealt our separation from God because of our sin. So all the demands of the law on us were dealt with – finished. As we put our trust in his work, that is effective to free us from the penalty and separation of sin.

But Jesus also looked forward. He will reign; a part of reigning is to enforce what is right and judge what is wrong. In the gospel passage John declared a judgement on the Jewish leaders – once again the metaphor of a tree being cut down is used. It was to take effect 40 years later with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD.

The Jesse tree theme continues into the New Testament. Jesus arguably makes allusion to it when he teaches the parable of the mustard seed:

Matthew 13:31-32 "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

It is a pretty obvious retelling of the word Ezekiel was given:

Ezekiel 17:22-23 "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches."

This is understood as another prophesy of the Messiah – the shoot. Then Jesus took it and retold it as the growth of the Kingdom of God, of his kingdom spreading until the birds of the air – the nations – come to perch on it. This too is part of the hope of Advent – we look to the time when the reign of Jesus extends across the world and brings peace to the nations.

In the Epistle reading, Paul makes the same point as he quotes Isaiah 11:10, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations[/Gentiles]; in him the Gentiles will hope."

Finally, in Revelation we find that Jesus uses the title for himself:

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." ⁵

Our hope is in Jesus – not in mankind's empty promises. We have seen how he himself came the first time. How he spoke of the increase of his rule. We have heard Isaiah describe the goodness of his future rule. We can look forward to the time when he reigns in power with righteousness and justice.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies.

Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁵ Revelation 22:16 see also 5:5