

Bible Study
Advent 2, Year A
December 4, 2016

[RCL] Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Isaiah 11:1-10

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 11, Verses 1-10, Isaiah shares his prophetic vision, most likely revealed to him in a dream, of the coming of the long awaited messiah, who we as Christians now know to be Jesus, and life in the messianic age when the wait was finally over. We are told of his nature with the Spirit of God resting upon him, that he would be wise, just, righteous, and faithful. In this age there would be peace, an absence of evil, and all would know about God. We are even offered a utopian vision of an upside down inside out world where even different animals are at peace in each other's company, a world of dreams in this age of the messiah.

We could easily be critical of what the followers of Jesus have offered to the world in this age of religious conflict and ideological divisions within churches, making it hard to imagine the utopia that the prophet Isaiah offers us in his imagined age of the messiah. In our own reality it may be easy to overlook the many unimaginable acts inspired by Jesus happening all around us, but they are there if only we are willing to see them.

- Are you convinced that this vision of the coming messiah offered by the prophet Isaiah is Jesus? What would you say to somebody who is doubting that Jesus is really the expected messiah?
- Can you imagine a world without Jesus? How different would the world be now without his coming and is there any evidence of this imagined utopia in reality?

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

In Psalm 72 the psalmist tells us of King Solomon's desire to be a good and respected leader, and so he asks God to grant him justice and righteousness, the qualities of God that the king most admires and which he hopes to imitate. The king succeeds in his desire and is loved by his people, however instead of being proud of himself for this achievement he acknowledges God as the source of his greatness and that God is much greater than he.

- What are the qualities you most admire about God? Have you ever asked God to help you be a great leader by imitating those qualities? What was the outcome?
- Do you know any great leaders that have acknowledged the role of God in their lives? What qualities do they demonstrate in their leadership?
- In what ways has God helped you in your achievements? In what practical ways do you or can you acknowledge him?

Romans 15:4-13

In the Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 15, Verses 4-13, the great missionary Paul writes to the Christians in Rome in his longest letter yet and perhaps the most influential of them all. In this part of his letter he is encouraging the Christians there to maintain hope in God and not to give up. He's also reminding them of the importance of living in harmony with other Christians and to be welcoming of each other just as Christ first welcomed them, and in so doing reflect positively on the God they all represent, especially to outsiders. Just as in the vision of the prophet Isaiah, all people should praise God and have hope in him, but this can only be possible by how outsiders see Christians behaving especially towards one another.

- As a Christian community and as individual Christians do we actively strive to live in harmony with other Christians and welcoming of them, even if we sometimes disagree with each other or struggle to relate to each other? Do our actions bring harmony or disharmony to the Church?
- In this age of divisions within the Church, in what practical ways can we attempt to bring harmony to the Church as Paul suggests we must do in order to allow outsiders to have hope in our God and praise him?

Matthew 3:1-12

In the Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 3, Verses 1-12, we are presented with a somewhat eccentric image of a fearless man living rough in both his appearance and in his daily sustenance for what he knew was his life's mission, considered to be the fulfilment of a great prophesy from the visions of the prophet Isaiah. This fearless man was of course John the Baptist, and the prophesy, preparing for the coming of God in to the world, the hope and prayer of generations of his stubbornly rebellious and long suffering people, the Israelites. The primary act of preparation for John we are told was the humbling act of the confessing of sins, those thoughts and actions below the expectations God has set for us and with the best intention of no longer doing those things, followed by the cleansing waters of baptism.

Perhaps surprisingly, we are told that John was not impressed when even Pharisees and Sadducees turned up in the crowd seeking baptism, even comparing them to venomous snakes and implying that no good could come of it.

If we read further to the Gospel of John in Chapter 15, Verses 1-11, we find references again to bearing fruit in the parable of the vine and the branches and a more detailed indication of what this could mean. Further in to this chapter we are told by Jesus in very clear and simple terms that the fruit he expects of us is to follow his teachings, just as he himself has done for his Father.

This is not just any love, but a sacrificial love. A love that may be difficult, a love that may seem impossible, a love that we may not even be able to comprehend. It is not the love often shown to us in this world, but the love shown to us by Jesus and ultimately our heavenly Father who sent him to us. As Christians already baptised or those eagerly awaiting to be baptised, this is our final test if we are truly to consider ourselves as followers of Jesus, as branches of the true vine producing the fruit expected of the one who planted it and continues to nurture it with great hope.

- If we as a community of Christians turned up for baptism by John, do you think he would welcome as warmly or also consider us venomous snakes like the Pharisees and Sadducees for not bearing the intended fruit of our baptisms?
- Can we with confidence consider ourselves true followers of Jesus in showing sacrificial love to those around us? In what ways are we doing this or could be doing this?

References:

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