

Advent 2 Year A

Readings: Isaiah 11: 1 – 10

Psalm 72: 1 – 7, 18 – 19

Romans 15: 4 – 13

Matthew 3: 1 – 12

The Christian season of Advent is a time of preparation of the coming of Christ. Like expecting parents we look forward to his coming as a baby at Christmas. With hope we also prepare for his coming as God's promised one, God's anointed one, Prince of Peace, a just and righteous king.

So how are your preparations going so far? Your answers might include things such as the setting of Christmas decorations, shopping for presents, the writing and sending of Christmas cards, and the list can go on. But all these aspects, in one way or another, include people; family, friends, and perhaps neighbours, or even strangers. Our preparations, then, are not only about organizing activities, they involve working out relationships. We prepare ourselves as best we can with the hope that things go well between us and others – with our family members, our friends, our neighbours, and so on. We want joy, peace and goodwill to be experienced in our relationships.

I think that the spirit of good and right relationships is at the heart of what the prophet Isaiah conveyed in one of our readings today. These verses from Isaiah chapter 11 articulate the deep and persistent human hope for peace and justice. Within the Christian Church, these words express the promise of a Messiah who will establish justice and peace on earth; justice and peace into the corrupt and conflict-ridden context of the people of God.

The stump of Jesse refers to the dynastic line of David's family. In being chosen by God, the line was believed to be the carrier of

God's goodness and God's faithfulness in the world. But the dynasty came into hard times and by the 6th century B.C., the political, economic, social and moral instability resulted in the destruction of the royal palace, the temple, the city, and the exile of its people to Babylon.

Prophetic rebuke pointed to the faithlessness and corruption of the leadership. Not only had they failed to honour the covenant relationship with the Lord their God, they also failed to exercise that honour with each other as a covenant people, particularly between the rich and poor of society, between the

powerful and the vulnerable, between the advantaged and disadvantaged. Isaiah uses the image of a dead tree stump to signify the situation of Israel and Judah.

Yet, it is into this hopeless and hostile context that Isaiah also speaks of a “shoot” that “shall come out of the stump of Jesse” (v.1). This new king, though coming from a dead stump, will be a sign of new life and who will live by “the spirit of the Lord.” The new king will demonstrate wisdom and understanding, to judge with righteousness, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth (vv. 2-4). The peace and justice of the new king not only

depicts the reign of God in the life of God's people, but also in the order of God's creation. In the peaceable kingdom there will be tranquility among all creatures, including predators and prey.

There has been some debate about whether these two sections actually belong together because there seems to be few links between them. But there is a view that the cosmic peace is the consequence of the rise of the new just king. As the saying goes, "If you want peace, work for justice."

As we have seen, the text concerns peace in the socio-political/economic order as well as among all creatures. As a whole, it suggests that human justice leads to a transformed relationship between human beings and the rest of creation, just as Hosea (4:1-3) shows that corruption in human society leads to destruction of the environment.

But the text is not one of instruction. It does not set out what people out to do within society or in relationship to the environment. It does not even call for criticism of injustice. It simply presents unqualified good news. Whether in this world or the next, these words

from Isaiah joyfully declares that God purposes and will one day bring about justice and peace for the world and all its living creatures.

It is only in the last verse (v.10) of our reading that we hear something of a response by people: “the nations shall inquire of him” or inquire of the king of peace, or of the God of this peaceable kingdom.

For someone like John the Baptist, a right response to God requires repentance. Into what he perceived were corrupt political and religious systems of his time, John proclaimed: “Repent, for the kingdom of

heaven has come near” (Mt. 3:2). The inference here is that the reign of God in which right living with God and in God’s world requires a turn-around in one’s life. This is a turn-around of one’s attitude and living so that there is a God-focus rather than purely a self-focus. Turning to God in repentance also meant knowing God’s mercy and grace in forgiveness. This seems fundamental to John’s understanding of the reign of God in the life of the people of God. Even to Pharisees and Sadducees, whom he criticized as a “brood of vipers”, who came to him for baptism, John challenged them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (v.8). In other words, their response to God’s mercy

and grace was not only about remorse for their failures, it was also about reflecting mercy and grace with others instead of with a highly critical and self-righteous view of them.

For John, this view of the reign of God culminates in the coming of Jesus who John says is “more powerful than I” and who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (vv.11-12).

Hope in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit is what the Apostle Paul believed was essential to the life of the Christian community. In recalling the words of Isaiah about the “root of Jesse” (Rom. 15:12) and its

hope for justice and peace, its hope for a right way for God's people to live together, Paul sought to encourage the diverse Christian church in Rome to do the same. In verses 5 and 6 he says, "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God of our Lord Jesus Christ."

For Paul, a life in Christ is one that reflects the mercy and grace that one has received from Christ in turning to Christ. This echoes the commandment of Jesus to his disciples to

love one another as he has loved them (Jn. 13:35). The rule of Christ as King, as the shoot or root of Jesse is grounded in justice and peace. According to Paul, the right thing for Christians to do, regardless of any differences they have from each other such as ethnicity, culture, colour, gender, social status, or even sexual orientation, is to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you” (v.7).

We live in the reign of God by reflecting what God has done for us. We do right by others because God has done right by us in Jesus Christ. We make peace with others because

God has made peace with us through Jesus Christ.

Today, we are encouraged about the reign of Christ's peace in our life and in our Christmas preparations. These are preparations for not only nice decorations, great gifts for exciting celebrations, but also for good relationships with others. We are encouraged to think about relationships in our life that require peace, or that require change in our attitude and actions so that peace can be made with those with whom we have differences. Maybe, like what Isaiah described, our experiences with others

have been so damaging that we only have stumps left to show for them.

I want to say that a dead stump is not the last word. I want to say that we have hope in Christ Jesus our Prince of Peace whose reign or kingdom is still being fulfilled in our life and world; even into our painful experiences.

If we want peace with others, then, we need to do the right or just thing. We need to reflect the mercy and grace that has been shown to us by the Prince of Peace. That may require a turn-around experience for us, but perhaps a necessary one to make the way straight for the Lord in our life. Amen.