

New Growth

TITLE

A few years ago, it was decided to cut down the overgrown and unmanageable trees in the Manse garden. The tree surgeons cut the trees down to their stumps. **DEAD STUMPS** You can still see the stumps of the felled conifers. There was no coming back for them. However, most of the broadleaved trees and bushes regenerated. **REGENERATING STUMPS** There are some like the holly and the buddleia that keep returning however much they are cut to the stump. This holly has come back despite being cut hard and being poisoned with a herbicide!

Whatever damage we inflict upon them, most broadleaved trees have the potential within them to regenerate from the stump, but conifers less so. Our reading this morning involved the felled trees of kingdoms and empires.

MAP OF THE KINGDOMS OF THE NEAR EAST IN PRE-EXILIC TIMES

The period which the prophecy of Isaiah covers represents the most turbulent for the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. They were being threatened by the aggressive empire of Assyria sweeping southwards. They quickly subsumed kingdoms in Syria and Lebanon and then destroyed Israel and carried the people away into exile and replaced them with other conquered people.

The early chapters of Isaiah were written a generation before the destruction of Jerusalem, in the years when Assyria under Sennacherib destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and then threatened Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. Of course, Judah under its kings, the descendants of David survived that attack by God's grace and intervention, but Isaiah's prophecy, although predicting the imminent downfall of Assyria (which happened), also predicted the eventual destruction of Judah too which happened a generation later. Why? **IDOLATRY** Because of the nation's disobedience of all towards God - the turning to idols away from Him and worse, that they put God on a par with idols made from wood or stone. Here's

ISAIAH 10:10-11

INJUSTICE

Because of turning away from God, all the societies of the Near East were living to their rules, not God's. Their societies were characterised by oppression and injustice. The crimes of these empires and kingdoms were not just against God but against their own people.

ISAIAH 10:12

In chapter 10 of Isaiah we read these verses about the destruction of these kingdoms and empires. **VERSES**

In the other part of chapter 10 we also read that they were going to be like a forest that was felled and cleared. In the Mediterranean, foresters must be careful with the felling of many tree species, as they don't regenerate easily, rather like my conifer tree stumps in the Manse garden. The soil is quickly washed away and all that is left is scrub. This was to be the fate of Assyria – it wasn't coming back. Good forest management is to always keep and plant trees that have good regenerative qualities. If they burn down or are cut to stumps, they will regenerate. This was applied to Judah in a special way.

REGENERATING STUMP

Judah, particularly the line of Jesse is described as a regenerating stump. It will be cut down, but God was going to bring back a king of the line of David. **VERSE**. It isn't the only reference to the Messiah that we remember at this time of the year - in chapter 7:14 we have Messiah described as Immanuel: God with us and in chapter 9 we have the "to us a child is born" descriptions of Messiah.

THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH

In chapter 11 we get more information about the Messiah so let's look at it for a few moments, see what we learn from it about Jesus, and reflect on how it may apply to our lives this Advent.

1. A BRANCH WHICH BEARS FRUIT

In both horticulture and forestry, the cutting down of trees regenerate can grow to be more productive than the original ever was. In Britain, mature trees have been coppiced from antiquity to produce rapid and productive growth. The words in Isaiah 11 are reminiscent of John 15 where Jesus talks of Himself being the True Vine and how he cleans its branches to make it more fruitful.

Messiah is a shoot that will bear a branch that is fruitful. Out of the ruin that that was the line of David comes One that will genuinely serve God's purposes. This passage is important to us because we are that branch and we have been 2700 years in the plans purposes of God since this prophecy 700 years before the birth of the Messiah. In these difficult days, never believe that we are unimportant in God's eyes despite all the recent disappointments. Through cleaning and pruning, God wants us to continue to bear fruit in our lives and in the church, not bring us down.

2. THE PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT

How will the Messiah be recognised? The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him and He will display the following characteristics that reflect who God the Holy Spirit is.

DESCRIPTION

the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord

We often associate Jesus with miraculous acts - these came too - but we see that the main characteristics of God-likeness is not merely action, but the wisdom, the thought, the attitude, the desire to be know God, the desire to please Him. All these came to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. It was God's holiness, His righteousness, His godliness, His wisdom, that characterised Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of David - but as we shall see in a moment, that translated into deeds too - which also showed others that the Spirit of God was on Him.

And we are members of that same branch. At this time in our history of our church, we need to have wisdom, understanding and right counsel, to deal with issues now and to deal with our direction as a church in the coming years. Where does all that come from? The Spirit of God. He indwells each of us who have followed Jesus, who own His name, who testify of what He has done as we eat bread and drink of the cup today. We ask Him to empower us, to endue us afresh with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might and with the knowledge and fear of the Lord.

3. RIGHTEOUS ACTIONS

He will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;

4

but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

5

Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

And where did the Spirit take Him? Into acting according to the righteousness of God not what He sees with his eyes or hears with His ears. We are under much pressure to follow the materialism and also the way of thinking what the world thinks is right and good, but God doesn't and Isaiah gives us an idea where the priorities of God lie: towards the poor and the needy, to those who need justice and not self-righteous and self-serving ways. Righteousness characterises Jesus, the Messiah. In this generation, we need to be people who reflect the righteousness of God. We need to examine our world through the lens of the mind of God and we find that in Scripture, and we rely on the Spirit to endue us with godly wisdom and knowledge as He did Jesus.

We are given specific ways in which the Messiah's coming and His rule and reign will be characterised: a priority of those in greatest need and desire to bring justice to them. What characterised Him characterise us? Finally...

3. He will bring a peace that defines how the world works

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

7

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

8

The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

9

They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

These words seem strange to us. Is this what will literally happen when Jesus finally rules and reigns - remember from last week that Advent is a process that reminds us that the coming of the Messiah started with an entry into the world and an earthly ministry ending with death and resurrection as we remind ourselves today followed by a gap where the Kingdom of God grows person by person culminating with the return of Jesus to rule and reign.

Will this result in this remarkable peace beyond predators and prey? I don't know. We'll have to wait and see! What I do know that this is a piece of poetry and there is such a thing as poetic licence, that describes something underlying. It describes a kingdom where there is peace, where those who in this present world are enemies are now friends. It's a peace unachievable by the present means human beings try to achieve it. The present growth of the Kingdom of God is al-

ready characterised by that peace - or should be. That was the teaching of Jesus: love Your neighbour, love one another, love your enemy.

These are the teachings of the kingdom of God. They are the values we should uphold, the values we should reflect. They are part of the Good News we preach and which we should continue to preach until the Lord returns when the whole world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Advent, followed by Christmas is a time when we are asked to remember these values. As we come around the table now, let's also affirm these as we come in confession and commitment around the table of Jesus; the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Let's pray.

Father, we come around the Lord's Table this morning. We do not invite Him, He invites us because in faith we have followed Him, understanding that He has died for us, His blood being shed for our sins.

Knowing that our sins have been forgiven and that we are branched with Jesus, we pray that we may be a fruitful people. After such a difficult perils, may we bear fruit in Him. Open our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit to change us into the people we need to be in the coming days and years to bear fruit. May Your Spirit produce in us the wisdom and knowledge, counsels and might, and give us the knowledge and fear of the Lord to act righteously according to Your ways, to Your values; that we may reflect Jesus in our lives and extend Your Kingdom by what we say and what we do that men and women may turn to Christ, find forgiveness, find salvation and be added to Your kingdom.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Communion

We come around the table to remember and celebrate Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of David of the root of Jesse, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We remember that, as prophesied in the Old Testament, the Messiah entered this world as a human being, to die on a Cross so that the human race may have a means of redemption, that God's kingdom may grow on this Earth until the time that the risen Jesus returns. And we have become part of all that when we trusted and followed Jesus for ourselves.

So this morning, we come around this table, His table and remember again His broken body and shed blood, knowing that through His Spirit He is present with us. Because of His finished work on the Cross, we have confidence to come before a Holy God, our Father in heaven. Let's listen to these words from the Letter to the Hebrews.

HEBREWS SLIDES

We will now be led in a prayer for the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.

Communion Prayer

WORDS OF INVITATION

Post Communion Prayer

Fellowship Prayers – people asked to call out the names of those requiring prayer.

For Reflection & Discussion

Read Isaiah 10:1-19

1. Take a look through this chapter. The destruction of Israel, Assyria and eventually Judah was prophesied as being God's judgement and God's hand was in it. What were the reasons given here for it and by all means add other references from scripture? What was the time scale over which prophesies like this were given and their fulfilment? Can we relate any of this to the rise and fall of modern countries and empires as some Christians do?

Read Isaiah 11:1-9

2. This is a famous passage we often read at Advent and Christmas which has always been regarded as a Messianic reference and is linked to the latter verses of chapter 10. What is going to be the impact of Messiah's rule and reign? Do you think the picture of creation Isaiah gives in verses 6-9 is literal?
3. The kings of the Near East of that time usually portrayed themselves as powerful vanquishes of strong animals like lions or wolves. How is Messiah different?
4. Verse 9 refers to Filling the earth with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. What does it tell us of the Messiah's rule and reign?