

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON
ST PETER'S NOTTING HILL
SUNDAY 10 DECEMBER 2023



Kensington Park Road London W11 2PN

Isaiah 9: 2 and 6-7

Isaiah 11: 1-4a

Isaiah 53:3-5

Malachi 3: 1-2

Isaiah 40: 3-5.

Isaiah 9: 2 and 6-7

²The people walking in darkness

have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of deep darkness

a light has dawned.

⁶For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given,

and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace

there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne

and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it

with justice and righteousness

from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty

will accomplish this.

PRAYER

O Lord in this Holy season of Advent

You call to us in many ways

Through our prayers

Through our worship

Through our Carol Services

Through our readings of Scripture

And through the great words

Of your ancient prophets

Which we are reflecting on today

O Lord may their words flow into our hearts

And may our hearts be open to their word

In Jesus Name **Amen**

If Pat had not been called to be a Vicar I am beginning to think that he might have been a good tabloid editor. And that's because he seeks to have a gift for writing headline and particularly for thinking on catchy headlines for a Series.

Last month we had a most successful series: **Eating with Jesus**

This month we now have a series titled: **Everything Points to Jesus**

This is a great strapline for an Advent Series and Pat kicked it off last Sunday on an appropriate lofty level by telling us eloquently that the whole universe points to Jesus.

He waxed lyrically about the great light Of the night sky, The starry Host, The Planets, The Galaxies.

"The Heavens are telling the Glory of God" he said quoting the marvellous opening line of Psalm 19. Beat that – which of course I can't!

So this Sunday I invite you to come down to Earth and look at the Scriptural signposts to the coming of Jesus which are to be found in the glorious words of the great prophets.

These are sometimes called the Messianic Prophecies.

The holy forecasts by great men of God

Particularly Isaiah

That the Messiah who turned out to be Jesus

Was coming to save the world.

* * *

Now I've been fascinated by the Messianic Prophecies ever since I was 9 years old. Why such a young age?

Not because I was a precocious future Vicar.

Far from it. I was an inky, naughty rather too bouncy schoolboy – but also a choirboy.

Every Sunday I sang in the choir of the small Suffolk town of Halesworth where we had an exceptionally talented Choirmaster and Organist when all of a sudden, we were invited to be part of a 300 strong chorus to sing in a massive performance of Handel's *Messiah* in Norwich Cathedral in February 1952.

Well as you can imagine we excited choirboys rehearsed and rehearsed. And then came the moment when we took the bus up to Norwich for our first big rehearsal in the cathedral.

If one or two of you have heard me tell this story before, forgive me, but it is an amusing tale which leads us into today's theme of the Messianic prophecies.

Our conductor was the legendary Sir Malcolm Sargent widely acclaimed to be Britain's top choral church music supremo of the 20th century.

And it was he who took us through the music and the words which come from our first reading:

“Unto us a child is born
Unto us a son is given”.

Those of you who know Handel's *Messiah* will remember that this particular chorus is opened up by the Altos who sing the line:

'Unto us a child is born' rather piano almost pianissimo before the tenors, basses and the boy trebles (including yours truly) come thundering in with the power of successive sonic booms.

As Isaiah aided by Handel declares that this child, will be called:

- Wonderful
- Counsellor
- The Mighty God
- The Everlasting Father
- The Prince of Peace

Thrilling stuff

- musically,
- spiritually
- and prophetically.

Anyway, back in 1952 as we started on our first rehearsal at Norwich Cathedral. Sir Malcolm Sargent did not seem entirely happy. His nickname by the way was "Flash Harry" partly because he fancied himself as a natty dresser and a sharp wit.

So he tapped with his conductors baton and addressed the Altos
They consisted of about 50 middle aged indeed white haired East Anglian ladies.

"Let's start again", said the great conductor.

"And my dear Lady Altos. Could you please render "*Unto us a child is born*" with a little more reverence and a lot less astonishment!"

Now of course we all laughed at Sir Malcolm's little jest but looking back at it more than seven decades later I actually think that the Altos got it right.

For Isaiah's prophecy about the child who was to be born was not just astonishing.

It was so:

- Amazing
- Extraordinary
- Sensational
- Stupendous

That you would need a whole Roget's Thesaurus of adjectives to describe it – and the description would still be inadequate.

So today let's look at the Messianic Prophecies of Isaiah which are seen as the harbingers of Advent, the trailers of Christmas and they fit perfectly into the headline Pat has given this series: "Everything points to Jesus"

Before we get to the prophecies themselves let's just spend a few seconds answering the question:

Who was Isaiah? We do not know all that much about him but we do know that he must have been born in about 720 BC – so over 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

He was born in Jerusalem the son of Amos. He was the scion of a good if not grand family known to be close to the King.

If you were looking for a contemporary British equivalent of the young Isaiah you might think of a young

- Grosvenor
- Or Spencer Churchill
- Or Cavendish
- Or Fitzalan Howard,

For that was probably his level of social status.

One other thing we know about this posh, well-connected Isaiah was that he was a rather pious young man who regularly worshipped in the temple in Jerusalem. We know that because on one of his visits to the temple in Jerusalem the year 740 BC – the year King Uzziah died (incidentally this is the only precise date given to any event in the entire Bible) the young Isaiah had an extraordinary Holy Spirit experience as we might call it.

All of a sudden as the temple filled with smoke and its doorposts shook Isaiah had a vision involving:

- Seraphs,
- And angels
- Flying around holding burning coals from the altar
- Then finally the Voice of God speaking

All this is described in Chapter 6 of the Book of Isaiah verses 1-6.

It's one of the greatest ever descriptions of theophany – a word meaning a direct experience of God – Pat preached on it superbly a few months ago.

But the climax of the vision comes when Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord asking him the questions:

Whom shall I send?

And who will go for me?

To which Isaiah humbly yet memorably responded: *Here am I. Send me.*

And from that moment onwards Isaiah became God's man and God's prophet. He lived on in Jerusalem well into his 80s preaching and calling to the people of Israel with warnings, calls to action and dramatic prophecies which brings us right now to his great Messianic prophecies which shaped the ancient world and should still be shaping our world today if we listen carefully to them.

* * *

The words of our first reading are so powerful and their message so astonishing that I hardly need to illuminate them further.

In an age when prophets and their prophecies were venerated, the people of ancient Israel would have been gobsmacked by the pronouncement from the great Isaiah that there would be coming the birth of an amazing King, Almighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace who would reign on the people of Israel from David's throne. All this sounded wonderful – but like many a tabloid editor Isaiah put the best news in the headlines. So there is no need to look at the small print to get the full picture.

For it emerged that there were two snags in this first prophecy. First the Israelites had to wait and wait and wait for over 5 centuries before the child was born. Some of them probably lost hope during that vast interval. They forgot that God's timing is often not our timing.

And the second snag was this first prophecy gave the impression that when the amazing child was born and grew up – he would be an omnipotent, majestic, all powerful, all governing, glorious King and Messiah.

That was right, but not quite right because Isaiah corrected or clarified his first Messianic Prophecy with a second one which appears just a chapter later in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Let me read it now as it goes up on the screen:

Isaiah 11:1-4a

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

³ and 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.

Let's look carefully at the nuances of this second great Messianic prophecy from Isaiah.

The references to the stump or the root of Jesse are just another way of saying that this wonderful child will be a descendant of the Royal House of David or in David's line – which Jesus was.

If you are interested in his historic genealogy, then look at the first 17 verses of the opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel which sets it out in rather tedious detail.

But what is really interesting about this second Messianic prophecy by Isaiah are the repeated mentions of The Spirit.

For this shoot or child from David's line is going to be hugely blessed by the Spirit of the Lord.

For Isaiah tells us that he will have the spirit of wisdom and understanding
The spirit of power, the spirit of knowledge and the spirit of delighting in
the Lord.

Now this repeated emphasis on The Spirit may have mystified the ancient
people of Israel. If only because references to the Holy Spirit in the Torah,
the Books of the Old Testament, are comparatively rare.
So they had hardly heard about Him.

But here in a Spirit filled Church like St Peter's you will immediately get the
point. Isaiah is prophesying that the coming wonderful child, Jesus, the
saviour and suffering servant of this world, He is going to have the Holy
Spirit resting on him in him, and empowering him to do God's great work.
What a prophecy! What a revelation!

What a transformation is on its way to the world through this coming
Messiah.

But there's another fascinating dimension to these new verses from Isaiah's
second Messianic prophecy. The people of Israel were expecting a Messiah
who would be a great and wonderful King who would lift Israel out of its
troubles and make it a sort of wealthy, mighty lottery winner among
nations.

But not so fast! These expectations were wrong. The nuances of the last
two verses suggest that the Messiah is going to be someone rather
different.

He will act and judge with righteousness.

He will look after the needy.

And "With Justice he will give decisions to the poor of the earth".

So the mighty, wonderful Messiah will also be a passionate champion of the poor and needy.

And that word 'passionate' deriving from the Latin word 'passing' or 'suffering' alerts us to another prophetic dimension to which I have already alluded which is that the Messiah will be a suffering servant. The suffering servant prophesy is to be found in **Isaiah Chapter 53 verses 3-5.**

³He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

⁴Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

So now Isaiah is giving a prophecy that many theologians say takes us to the Passion of Jesus Christ and to his death on the Cross.

He is prophesying that the Messiah will suffer with us and for us, and that we ourselves will be healed because of his wounds and sufferings.

Now Christian teachings and theology ever since the days of the early church say that these prophetic words were Messianic.

But it is only fair to tell you that Orthodox Jewish teaching rejects that view.

Hence the sad division in the Judea-Christian tradition which prevails to this day.

However, there's more to come to support the Christian view, and not only from Isaiah.

Because other prophetic voices, including Isaiah, started making mysterious but dramatic forecasts about the coming of a messenger ahead of The Messiah.

Let's glance at the words of Malachi, the Prophet whose words are to be found in the last book of the Old Testament.

Malachi 3:1-2

3 "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

Now this is hot news.

God is sending a messenger evidently with an uncomfortable message.

It suggests that everyone who hears it will have to go through a refiner's fire and be scrubbed clean with a launderer's soap.

But then, and this perhaps is our most dramatic and specific prophetic utterance we go back to the Book of the Prophet Isaiah for further news of this message.

Isaiah 40: 3-5

³ A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare

the way for the LORD^[a];

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.^[b]

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,

every mountain and hill made low;

the rough ground shall become level,

the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,

and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Right at the beginning of this talk I told you that I had been fascinated by these prophecies of Isaiah ever since I first sang them in that memorable performance of the *Messiah* in Norwich Cathedral 72 years ago.

And even as a 9 year old after hearing Handel's haunting tenor Aria which opens the *Messiah* I longed to know:

Who was this voice crying in the wilderness?

Why was he preparing a highway for God in the desert?

How could every valley be exalted?

And every mountain hill made low?

And how was the glory of the Lord going to be revealed?

And how was all flesh or all mankind going to see it together?

* * *

God questions whether you are 9-years-old or 90 years-old.

The holy season of Advent is a great mystery. As it points us towards Jesus it sometimes offers more questions than answers and the questioning Advent journey of seeking faith may be more important than either the answers or the non-answers.

* * *

But actually, we do know some of the answers for it became clear this voice crying in the wilderness was the voice of John the Baptist.

He was more than a prophet. He was God's messenger.

Jesus said of him in Matthew 11:11: "I tell you the truth. Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist'. John did prepare the way for Jesus.

He preached the good news of the Gospel with uncompromising clarity and even sometimes brutality.

I don't think any Anglican Vicar would last long if he or she began their sermons by addressing their congregations with these words from John the Baptist:

"You brood of vipers!" (Matthew 3:7) John was not afraid to speak truth to power and eventually Herod executed him for his courage.

But John the Baptist may of upset King Herod but he drew huge crowds out of Israel's cities and into the desert where he proclaimed the coming of Jesus and baptised him in the River Jordan.

And what was John's surprisingly popular message during the First Advent:
"Repent and Believe the Good news!"

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance". (Matthew 3:8).

It's the same message we need to hear today in our 21st century Advent.

Unfortunately the word "repent" is a rather baffling, negative word in today's English Language. It conjures up images of saying sorry over and over again of standing in the corner wearing the dunce's cap and in the old days "wearing sackcloth and ashes"

That's not what John the Baptist was on about.

If you go to the Greek language in which the Gospel accounts of John the Baptist's preaching are recorded, the word for Repentance is METANOIA which means META = a change and NOIA = of mind. More richly translated as "a change of heart and mind".

* * *

So the powerful prophetic voice of God's messenger was asking the people of Israel listening to him from Jordan's bank 2000 years ago:
"Change your hearts and minds"

How do we respond to that same challenge today in this Spirit filled season of Advent?

How are we going to change our hearts and minds?

How are we going to get the fruit of repentance?

Perhaps the fruit of repentance will become much the same as the fruit of the Spirit later defined in Galatians as: "Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Goodness, Kindness, Faithfulness, Gentleness; and self-control." We would all like to find more of that fruit!

To find Jesus this Advent we could try, as Pat suggested in his sermon last week, to look up to the stars in awe and wonder. And know the God who made the Universe is there.

We could try listening to the strange rustlings and murmurings and messages of Advent and start to understand that Jesus is coming.

Or Perhaps we could hear this message in the readings, or talks or carols in our Christmas services.

Or perhaps most likely of all we will the message of Advent in silences of our hearts and minds and in our prayers.

As we tune in to the mysterious movements of the Holy Spirit.

* * *

One of the most exciting aspects of the first Advent was that the Holy Spirit, almost unknown in the time of the Old Testament except to Kings and Prophets. Suddenly, in accordance with Isaiah's prophecy, made himself known to ordinary people in an amazing way.

Just read the opening Chapters of Luke's Gospel and you will see that the Holy Spirit arrived and started hopping and bopping all over the hill country of Judea. The Holy Spirit came to the humble parents of John the Baptist, Zacariah and Elizabeth. Then he filled John the Baptist – who preached with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then the poor and probably terrified village girl Mary, was told by the Angel the amazing news that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit to which she responded with supreme obedience: "I am the Lords servant. May it be to me as you have said" and on and on the Holy Spirit went.

Appearing to Simeon the old man in the Temple, to Anna, an old lady prophetess in the Temple and on and on down the millennia into our 21st century hearts

And he is with us here in St. Peter's today. So come Holy Spirit! Just as you inspired the ancient Prophets and just as you filled John the Baptist with your power: Come Holy Spirit.

Be our Guide, Comforter, Advocate and Empower this Advent. Point us to Jesus through the Universe and through the Prophets. Come Holy Spirit.

And if we hear your call may we respond as Isaiah did in our own way. "Here am I – Send me". Come Holy Spirit.

Amen