

starters for Sunday

Second Sunday of Advent

8th December 2013

Susan Miller, Theology and Religious Studies Tutor on the Access Programme at Glasgow University, offers her thoughts on this second Sunday in Advent.

Contents

Introduction	2
Isaiah 11:1-10	2
Psalm 72.....	4
Romans 15:4-13.....	5
Matthew 3:1-12	6
Prayers.....	8
Time with Children.....	13
Musical Suggestions.....	13
Additional Resources.....	14



Introduction

The second Sunday of Advent features the prophet John the Baptist. In several ways John the Baptist is similar to the prophets of the Old Testament. He bravely confronts the political and religious authorities of the land and his message has a strong ethical focus on justice and the protection of the poor. On the other hand, John differs from the Old Testament prophets because his mission is closely connected to the advent of Jesus. John is regarded as the forerunner to Jesus since he comes to prepare the way of the Lord. He calls for repentance in light of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of heaven. Just as God has led the Israelites through the desert from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Babylon, Jesus will lead us through the desert places in our lives to new life.

The readings on the second Sunday of Advent centre on the theme of peace. Isaiah describes the peace which arises from the rule of the descendant of David. The king will bring peace to humanity which will be reflected in the animal world and in the whole of creation. Psalm 72 emphasises the role of the king as the preserver of justice and the defender of the poor. In his letter to Romans, Paul seeks to reconcile the differences between Jewish-Christians and Gentile Christians by urging them to conform to the unity of Christ. John the Baptist points forward to Jesus who is the one who will bring peace to the world. In Advent these prophecies of peace challenge us to be peacemakers within our families, communities and in the wider world.

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#)

Our first reading is the prophecy of Isaiah which describes the future ruler who will be a descendant of David. The Spirit gives the ruler the qualities necessary to make right judgements. The Davidic ruler is given the Spirit of the Lord: a spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. In the Ancient Near East the king had the responsibility of ensuring justice for his people. The king is presented as the defender of the most vulnerable people in the land.



The Davidic king will not judge by “what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear”. He will not judge by appearances, but with righteousness, and he will live by faithfulness to God. The king will make sure that the poor and the meek have the same access to justice as the rich and the powerful. There will be not be a law which favours the rich and powerful and disadvantages the poor and the meek. Isaiah’s prophecy points to the way in which a nation is judged by the way in which it cares for the most vulnerable people within it. Everyone will be able to put their trust in the justice system of the land, and only then will there be a true peace founded on justice.

In the past, the king ensured peace and justice in the human kingdom, but Isaiah speaks also of peace within the animal world. Just as powerful human beings will no longer oppress the meek, predatory animals such as the wolf and leopard will no longer prey on the lamb or the kid. Isaiah gives a prophecy of harmony in which the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child will lead them. This is a vision of harmony as in the Creation narrative in Genesis.

Isaiah’s description of the holy mountain where there will be neither hurt nor destruction recalls the account of the goodness of creation in Genesis. Isaiah however, goes beyond the account of creation in Genesis since he takes into account the experience of violence and suffering in the world. The future ruler brings peace after experiencing the human propensity for violence and the human desire for power. He revisions and transforms our understanding of what it is to be human in the picture of the little child who is the one who leads.

Isaiah’s vision has attracted the interest of artists such as the nineteenth century American artist, Edward Hicks. Hicks’s painting *The Peaceable Kingdom* depicts a large friendly ox and a large lion eating straw, and children play with the leopard, the bear and the ox. The colours of the painting are deep shades of green and brown, rich earth colours portraying a fertile landscape. The painting has an air of calmness and peace, and an almost otherworldly atmosphere. Hicks was a Quaker and he was fascinated by Isaiah’s prophecy. Throughout his career he painted around sixty one versions of this scene. His painting reflects the Quaker belief in the inner light in which



each person yields his or herself to God. Quakers seek to live in accordance with the divine power of Christ which dwells within each individual. His painting, however, has a political dimension which points to the disharmony within the human world. On the right side of the painting a group of Native Americans and settlers are signing a treaty of peace. The Native Americans have lost their land and have paid a large price for a peace which is far from the right relations between humanity and the earth prophesied by Isaiah.

Isaiah's prophecy is associated with the advent of Jesus who is known as the Son of David. The description of the future Davidic ruler reminds us of the birth of Jesus when God comes among us as a child. Jesus is one who lives among us in the midst of violence and suffering, in the midst of struggles for power and in the midst of struggles for peace. He leads us on a new path through vulnerability and powerlessness to peace. He will stand as a signal to the peoples not from a position of power but from the cross. He will stand as one who brings reconciliation to the world and calls us to follow his path of peacemaking.

[Psalm 72](#)

In ancient Israel Psalm 72 may have been sung at the coronation of the king or at a royal festival. The Psalm emphasises that God is the one who determines justice, and the king is the representative of God on earth. The king has the duty of maintaining justice in the land, and he has a particular role of defending the poor and protecting the vulnerable.

The just rule of the king is reflected in the fruitfulness of the land. The righteousness of the king brings peace which corresponds to the earth which produces abundant crops. Through history this psalm has been interpreted as a prophecy of the Messiah who will inaugurate a new age of peace in the world.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in ecological readings of Biblical texts. Scholars have pointed to passages which depict the interdependence of humanity, the animals and the earth. Isaiah 11 and Psalm 72 both emphasise the connections between right human



actions and the flourishing of earth. Advent is a time when we consider the significance of Jesus to humanity but also to the whole of creation. Some scholars have developed ecological readings of the Bible which may be used at different times of the church year as in *The Seasons of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* edited by N.C. Habel, D. Rhoads and H. P. Santmire (Fortress, 2011).

[Romans 15:4-13](#)

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul speaks of seeking peace within a Christian community. Paul aims to promote unity in a church which consists of Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. The nature of this unity must be “in accordance with Christ Jesus”.

Paul tells the Christians to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed them. Christ became a servant to Jews so that the promises of God to the patriarchs may be fulfilled and in order that gentiles may also be included among the people of God. Paul’s reference to the role of Jesus as a servant recalls the teaching of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus defines his mission as service: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” (10:45).

Paul emphasises that the faith of the gentiles has been prophesied in the scriptures. He refers to several passages which speak of the worship of God by the gentiles (Psalm 18:49; Deut 32:43; Psalm 67:1; Isaiah 11). These quotations brings us near to the sentiment expressed in Isaiah. The descendant of David is the one who will fulfil the promises to the gentiles.

Paul seeks peace between two groups: Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. The promises of God come first to the Jews and then through Jews to the gentiles. This pattern is outlined in Romans 9-11. His approach to reconciliation may be applied to any two groups who are in a situation of conflict. Paul emphasises the unity which reflects the unity of Christ which is a unity based on service and self-giving love.



[Matthew 3:1-12](#)

Our gospel reading describes the mission of John the Baptist in the wilderness of Judea. John is presented as an apocalyptic prophet who cries out to the crowds to repent because the kingdom of heaven has come near. John is identified as the one Isaiah describes who cries out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. John's mission is one of preparation for the coming of Jesus. John's appearance recalls the description of the prophet Elijah. John wears clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and in 2 Kings 1:8 Elijah is described as "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist". In the Old Testament Elijah does not die but is taken up to heaven. He is expected to return before the Day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5).

John's mission attracts huge crowds and Matthew states that the people of Jerusalem and all Judea are going out to him and all the region along the Jordan. Why do these people go out to a marginal figure in the wilderness? John's message of repentance is an address to individuals to change the direction of their lives, to turn away from their own desires and to orientate themselves towards God since the kingdom of heaven is coming soon. The demands of the kingdom take precedence over all other desires and plans. John's message is also addressed to a community of people. The movement of people out from the city of Jerusalem suggests that the people are dissatisfied with the current leadership. Jerusalem and Judea are ruled by Romans. The priests of the temple collaborate with the Romans to maintain power and to be allowed to practise their faith. This comes at a cost: taxes are high and there is poverty throughout the land.

The Pharisees and Sadducees come out to see John the Baptist, and they represent two approaches to the current political and religious situation of the land. The Pharisees are concerned with ritual purity and they are depicted as the main opponents of Jesus in the Gospels. The Sadducees are the priestly group who have control over the Temple. John's message has an ethical emphasis. In Luke, he tells the crowds that whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise. In our reading John tells the Pharisees and the Sadducees to bear fruit worthy of repentance. If the people repent, right actions will flow from their repentance.



John's mission in the wilderness of Judea and his act of baptism in the Jordan recall the journey of exiles through the wilderness. John has gone into the wilderness to prepare for a new beginning. He calls the crowds to prepare for the Lord who will lead him through the wilderness as God led them through the wilderness after the exile.

John's message recalls the prophecy of Isaiah to prepare the way of the Lord. Isaiah speaks of the return of the people from exile in Babylon. God goes before the people through the wilderness. In our passage, the crowds go out to the wilderness to start again. John envisages Jesus leading his people through the desert.

John baptises people in preparation for the advent of Jesus. What is the significance of his act of baptism? The term "baptisms" could refer to "washings" in water and it is associated with ritual washings in some Jewish writings. Gentiles who converted to Judaism also took part in ritual washings to remove their impurity. John appears to be the first person to conduct the baptism of individuals which happens on only one occasion. John's baptism represents the repentance of a human being who turns towards God. Baptism has eschatological significance since it represents the movement of an individual from one world to another, from the old age to the new age of the kingdom.

John the Baptist is a prophet who calls us to see the world through God's eyes. This Sunday's readings raise questions about where we are able to hear a prophetic voice today? How can we see the world from God's perspective so that we can live in peace together and build a better future for all of us?

The Poverty Truth Commission brought together people who have experience of poverty with some of Scotland's civic leaders to work together in 2009-2011 www.povertytruthcommission.org. The group aimed to bring to light the truth about poverty in Scotland today and to find ways of overcoming it. The motto of the Poverty Truth Commission is "Nothing about Us, without Us, is for Us" because it is not possible to address poverty without



the involvement of people who have experience of it. The commission calls on the people living in poverty to be involved in shaping and delivering anti-poverty policy.

One of the challenges from the commission speaks particularly to us as we prepare for a referendum on the independence of Scotland next year “We call for the people of Scotland to share our outrage at the huge and growing levels of disparity which exist between rich and poor. We challenge civic society, including the faith communities, to enable those in poverty to lead the debate on how we can develop a fairer and more equal Scotland.”

Prayers

Stand upright and hold your heads high, because your liberation is near. St Luke 21:28

Collect

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away
the works of darkness
and put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your son Jesus Christ
came to us in great humility;
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge both the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Gathering Prayer

This Advent,



We are waiting for you in the desert places
where people are struggling to make ends meet
where people are frightened by debt
where people suffer from ill health
where people are burdened by guilt
and where people are lonely and
have no friend to turn to for help.

God of the desert

You led your people through the desert to a new life
We are waiting for you and the promise of your kingdom
The path is dusty
Our shoes are worn,
And sometimes we do not know where we are going
for we trust in you
To come again and lead us to new life
Amen

Approach and Confession

In the beginning darkness covered the deep
While the Spirit of God swept over the surface of the waters
Then God spoke separating light from darkness
Bringing creation from chaos
Breathing life into human beings
God of life we worship you.

In the beginning was the word
And the word was with God
And the word was God.
Then John the Baptist came
Crying in the wilderness



Prepare the way of the Lord
Make his paths straight
God of the prophets we worship you.

At the beginning of Advent
We are waiting for your word
To speak to us in our lives
We seek your word of peace and hope
And we are waiting for the birth of a child once again
Jesus Son of God we worship you.

You speak to us now
Calling us to prepare the way of Jesus
Turning us away from what harms us
Counselling us to put our trust in you.

Silence...

But sometimes the waiting is too hard
We have no vision
Our courage fails and our dreams fade –
and so, In silence we pray for forgiveness...

Your promises are true
You bring us forgiveness
Renewing our lives with your Spirit
And we are waiting for the birth of Jesus
For then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
And all the people will see it together
And so we pray in the words which Jesus taught us:



Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever.
Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

God of hope
We give you thanks for the promise of your kingdom
For the anticipation and excitement of Advent
As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus

We give you thanks for the words of the prophets of the past
who told us of your kingdom.
We give you thanks for the prophets of our own time
Who challenge us
to seek new ways of living
in community
and in peace with the earth.

We are waiting for you to turn the world upside down



For the powerful to become powerless
The rich to become poor
The strong to become weak
For our true power, wealth and strength
are found only in following you.

We wait for you in places of war and conflict
Where you come to us in peace
Give us hearts of compassion, we pray,
Let us be communities of peace.

We wait for you in places of poverty
Where people are worn down by cuts in benefits
Give us hearts of generosity, we pray,
Let us be communities of justice.

We pray for you in hospitals
Where people wait for operations
In homes where people are bereaved
Give us hearts of comfort, we pray,
Let us be communities of healing.

We wait for you in our homes,
with our friends, our families
and alone.
For you know our hearts desire
and our hearts are restless until
we find peace in you. Amen



Time with Children

Ask the children what kind of things they do to prepare for some friends coming to their homes. How would they make their friends feel happy? Advent is a time in which we prepare for Jesus coming into the world. Talk to the children about John the Baptist, the prophet sent by God to prepare us for Jesus. The people from the city of Jerusalem go out to John to be baptised. These people wish to change the direction of their lives and to live in the way that God would like them to live.

In conclusion, ask the children and adults present how they would like the church to prepare for the coming of Jesus this Christmas.

Musical Suggestions

CH4 89 For you, the pride from my heart is banished

CH4 198 Let us build a house where love can dwell

CH4 241 Isaiah the prophet has written of old

CH4 273 O come, O come, Emmanuel

CH4 274 Comfort, comfort, now my people

CH4 275 Come now, O Prince of peace

CH4 276 Wait for the Lord, his day is near

CH4 281 People, look East. The time is near.

CH4 334 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

CH4 472 Come, thou long-expected Jesus

CH4 694 Brother, sister, let me serve you

Ch4 702 Lord who is thy perfect wisdom

CH4 248 For my sake and the Gospel's, go

CH4 125 Lord of all being



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Susan Miller for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

