



Parish of Finchampstead and California

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

7 - 12 December 2020

INTRODUCTION

Between now and Christmas we will be reading some of the Biblical background to Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. This week we'll be looking at prophecies from the book of Isaiah (sometimes referred to as the fifth Gospel because of its extensive predictions that were fulfilled in Jesus). In the remaining days we'll move on to the first chapters of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Much of the material will be familiar, but it may be helpful to see it all gathered together. As usual the Thoughts will be based principally on the text in bold type.

MONDAY - Isaiah 11:1-9

- ¹ A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- ² **The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.**
- ³ His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
- ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
- ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

Thought for the day

There are lots of theories about the authorship and dating of the book of Isaiah, which may actually be three or more original texts combined together, but these need not affect the message of individual passages such as this one. The reference to Jesse, the father of David, (v1) tells us that this prophecy relates to aspects of kingship. In v2-5 we have a description of an ideal king and in v6-9 an outline of God's will for his peaceful kingdom. Both sections emphasise the alignment of the king (v2-3) and the realm (v9) with God's priorities. Look closely at the characteristics of the ideal king in verse 2 and reflect on the extent to which they fit what we know about Jesus.

TUESDAY - Isaiah 9:2,6-7

**² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.**

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Thought for the day

Right at the beginning of John's Gospel we read how Jesus, the Word of God, brought light and life to everyone, overcoming the darkness in which they lived (John 1:4,5,9). In this passage Isaiah uses the same powerful metaphor (v2) before going on to proclaim four titles of the ideal king (v6). The reference to a child being born (v6) makes this an inevitable Christmas reading and 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace', seem entirely appropriate to Jesus as he displays God's characteristics in his life; all this accords with God's plan - the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (v7).

WEDNESDAY - Isaiah 40:1-5,9-11

¹ Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
³ **A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**
⁴ **Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.**
⁵ **Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'**
⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.
¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Thought for the day

These verses are one of the best known sections of the whole book of Isaiah, not least because they were given such prominence in Handel's Messiah (Comfort ye, Every valley, O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, He shall feed his flock). The wilderness (v3) held a special place within Israelite history, not only because of the events that occurred there after the exodus from Egypt, but because it was seen as the place of preparation for the nation's entry into the Promised Land. Once again, perhaps reflecting a return from the wilderness of exile in Babylon, the wilderness will play an important role in disclosing God's glory to his people (v5). In Christian reflection on this passage, the voice crying out (v3) is always that of John the Baptist - see for example the quotation of this verse in Mark 1:3 and parallels in Matthew and Luke. John will herald (v9) Jesus. And Jesus will not only come 'with might' (v10), but as the Good Shepherd (v11).

THURSDAY - Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
⁹ Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
¹⁰ **The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.**

Thought for the day

Like yesterday's, this passage probably originally reflected the coming end of the exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of Jerusalem out of the ruins (v9) to be once again the place in which God reigns (v7). Notice how in verse 10 this transformation may be for the benefit of the Jewish people, but it will stand as an example to the whole world - all nations, ends of the earth (v10). The special relationship between God and the children of Israel always had in view the eventual embrace of everyone - which is why the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem is such an important element of the Christmas story. In fact verse 10 almost says 'Everyone will see Jesus', since Jesus' name in Hebrew means 'God saves'.

FRIDAY - Isaiah 60:1-3,18-19

¹ Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
² For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
¹⁸ Violence shall no more be heard in your land,
devastation or destruction within your borders;

you shall call your walls Salvation,
and your gates Praise.

**¹⁹ The sun shall no longer be
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give light to you by night;
but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.**

Thought for the day

This passage picks up again the idea of how God's selection of Israel as his nation will serve as an example, and thereby provide an access point, to all other nations (see Thursday). It also uses the metaphor of light coming and dispelling the darkness (v1-3), as in Tuesday's reading. But today's goes even further - sun and moon will become unnecessary because God will provide all the light his people need (v19). Those of you who persisted to the end with our daily readings from Revelation, which concluded last week, will remember that this striking idea makes an appearance in John's vision of the new Jerusalem (Revelation 22:5), when God and the Lamb (Jesus) take their places on their throne (22:3).

SATURDAY - Isaiah 35:1-6

¹ The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

**⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;**

**⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.**

Thought for the day

Once again the wilderness loses its threatening aspect and becomes a place of restoration for the Jewish people (see Wednesday), and the place where neighbouring nations will see the glory of the Lord (v2) - only two chapters earlier they had been destined for destruction (see 33:9). When God comes he will have a special care for those normally marginalised (weak, feeble, fearful will be made strong - v3-4; blind, deaf, lame, dumb will be made whole - v5-6). When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was 'the one who is to come,' Jesus appropriated these last two verses to himself, claiming not only that he was doing these things, but that he was coming in God's place to save his people (v4) - see Matthew 11:2-5; Luke 7:18-23. Earlier this week we have seen how Isaiah's prophecies were applied by the early Christian community to Jesus. In this final reading we have evidence that Jesus himself considered that he was indeed that fulfilment.