Reflections on the First Week of Advent – by Fiona 2nd December 2020



Photo: Fiona's Family Advent wreath, icon and Crib

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer regularly providing video resources. We have included some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us', we usually meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in the physical space of the meditation room at Wisdom Centre, although we are meditating in our own homes at present. The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer, which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction:

Jesus said *"I am the light of the world"* (John:8:12). As we light our advent wreath, or read our advent devotions, we often encounter what Isaiah, the 8th-century BC Israelite prophet, foretold in this popular Advent reading:

Lighting of the Advent wreath (at Home, or reflecting on the picture above) *"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. […] 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. 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." (Isaiah 9:2, 6-7).

Reflection*:* Like myself, you may feel that Advent and the promise of a dawning light of justice and righteousness provides a welcome counterpoint to the darkness of this present pandemic, leaving in its wake an atmosphere of economic instability, fear and uncertainty. Racial inequality came to the fore earlier this year (2020), with the death of George Floyd in the USA. In the UK, the spotlight fell on the slave trade. Protesters threw a statue of the slave trader Edward Colston into the river in Bristol, UK. There has been little light in this story: a response to 18th Century brutality was 21st century violence, as a means of achieving the otherwise noble principles of equity, equality, respect and emancipation. Continuing are religious extremism in Europe and restrictions on Palestinians' human rights in Israel/ Palestine. Endless peace is what we must look for, what we must strive for, what we must pray for.

Isaiah is my favourite Old Testament prophet. I was pleased that today's reading in my book of Advent reflections (1) is Isaiah 11:1-10 which begins with:

*"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of **Jesse**, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of **Wisdom** and understanding…"*

Many Christians hear this reading every year and are already familiar with it, but we perhaps don't give it the reflection it deserves. In the Advent Season, 'the Wisdom', resting upon the lineage of Jesse, the father of King David, is also known as 'Sapientia' in Latin, and 'Sophia' in Greek. 'O Wisdom'/ 'O Sapienta' is traditionally celebrated by Roman Catholics and Anglicans on the 17th of December as the first of the Advent 'O' Antiphons. In my Church, the Antiphons are also read at the Advent Carol service on the first Sunday, which climaxes with the Advent Hymn 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.'

During Advent, we rightly focus on the coming of God, Christ incarnate, the baby in the manger, first seen by the Jewish shepherds (Luke), then Wise Men from the East (Matthew). However, as we enter Advent there are two further areas of thought arising from Isaiah 11 that might deepen our reflection on the meaning and power of the Nativity story:

Jesus Christ as incarnate Wisdom. Jesus as incarnate Wisdom is overlooked in my own Anglican tradition. During Advent we traditionally hear a lot from the prophet Isaiah. However, Isaiah is actually walking backwards into the recesses of eternity to proclaim Wisdom as an attribute of God, 'the Word of God' as *"a child born, to us a son is given."* The prophesised *"Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."(*Isaiah 9) becomes the New Testament Jesus Christ, the eternal, living Word, which was "in the beginning with God" (John 1:2).

In the classic Advent sequence of 'O' Antiphons, the reading of Ecclesiasticus 24: 3 Wisdom says, *"I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,"* followed by *"reaching from one end to the other mightily, and sweetly ordering all things"* (Wisdom 8:1). This is preceded by Ecclesiasticus 24 1-2, where Wisdom tells of her glory in the midst of her people. *"In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory."*

The seven O Antiphons— 17 December: O Sapientia (O Wisdom); 18 December: O Adonai (O Lord); 19 December: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse); 20 December: O Clavis David (O Key of David); 21 December: O Oriens (O Dayspring) 22 December: O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations); 23 December: O Emmanuel (O With Us is God). The first letter of each Latin antiphon in reverse order—E for Emmanuel, R for Rex, O for Oriens etc. spells out a phrase in Latin: ERO CRAS, which means, "Tomorrow I will come." These seven Antiphons point toward the coming feast of the Nativity, Christmas, when we will celebrate the Incarnation, while also pointing back to the beginning.

If you are Anglican or Protestant, you may be asking yourself where you can find the books of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus. In the Anglo-Catholic tradition, Wisdom/ Ecclesiasticus is only quoted on the 17th of December for the Advent sequence 'O Sapientia.' In the Anglican Evangelical tradition Wisdom is never heard; this is because for Anglicans both Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom are 'extra-canonical' and only available in the Apocrypha supplement or a Catholic edition of the Bible. This is a certain grief to Anglo-Catholics such as myself.

Hope for peace and equity in the Advent season and beyond. Reading into the text, we can learn a lot about the ideal of peace equity and equality in God's kingdom and how far from that ideal we have wondered.

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,

and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1)

Jesse is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus. According to the Bible, Jesse was the grandson of Ruth, a converted Moabite idolator, and of Boaz, a Jew from Bethlehem, Judea. Jesse was a prominent resident of the town of Bethlehem and important in Judaism because he was the father of the most famous King of Israel, King David. King David was of Moabite lineage through his great-grandmother, Ruth. It is important to note that the Arab Moabite and the Kingdoms of Israel share common ancestry and were originally 'one people.' Although only Christians recognise Jesus as the Son of God, Muslims recognise him as a major prophet.

The linage of Jesus as the shoot from the stock of Jesse was therefore both Jew and Gentile or pagan. (although today we understand and respect the faiths of others). For me, the Advent message is one of the ideal of uniting God's people where Wisdom is pervading all. Male and Female, Jew and Gentile, Slave and free are all one people with one God, in Christ (Galatians 3:28), whose hope begins with the words of the first Advent Antiphon, 'O Wisdom.' The full chapter of Isaiah 11:1 lays out God's vision for the coming Christ:

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump **of Jesse**,*
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
***the Spirit of Wisdom and understanding**,*
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth…
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:1)

The picture of Jesus that Isaiah paints is not simply a Christmas card illustration of a Holy King in a manger. Jesus is the very fabric and Spirit of the Wisdom of God. In the New Testament St Paul describes *"Christ [as] the power of God and the Wisdom of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Yes, Wisdom is available to the entirety of creation, regardless of gender, class, race, or any boundary established by humanity. The Spirit of wisdom is a characteristic of a God who seeks to work in us to make the world better for all. This attribute is evident in Christ's leadership that we must surely follow.
When we relegate Jesus to the role of historic figure and object of worship on Sundays and holidays, we miss the greatness of incarnate Wisdom, the Jesus Christ that Isaiah prophesies. The Spirit of Wisdom who rests on Jesus, the shoot of Jesse, is the Spirit of counsel and might. This is the Wisdom of which the book of Proverbs also speaks:

Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
2 On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand…
4 "To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.
the first of his acts of long ago.
23 Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
24 When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
22 The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
25 Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
26 when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
27 When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
28 when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
29 when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
30then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
31rejoicing in his inhabited world

and delighting in the human race. (Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31)

The text from Proverbs shows us that Genesis 1:1 is not the absolute beginning of creation. Although the author of Genesis decided to leave Gods life prior to creation in the dark, (2) we see Wisdom's presence in Proverbs before the beginning of the earth. As the Advent Antiphon 'O Sapienta' also says: She, Wisdom, "came forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other mightily, and sweetly ordering all things' (Ecclesiasticus 24: 3; Wisdom 8:1).

Proverbs 9:10 (Which is included in the Anglican Canon) also teaches us that "The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding"

Every Gospel shows Jesus to be one whose understanding was beyond what anyone could have expected. As a boy in the temple, he sat among the teachers and amazed everyone with his wisdom. As a teacher he regularly amazed people from his hometown all the way to Jerusalem, as he taught during festivals and in the Synagogues. As we begin Advent, we must remember that Jesus is the shoot of Jesse who comes in the power and Wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The hope of Jesus is not just a cosmic hope, but also a real here and now hope. Wisdom 'takes her stand at the crossroads' (Proverbs 8:1), which I think of as the meeting of heaven and earth, however poor the ecological, economic and spiritual estate of the earth and its people.

Isaiah proclaims that his prophesised son delights in obeying God. His obedience mediates Justice from the crossroads. He doesn't judge based on appearance or hearsay. The rich have no special privilege, he ensures that the poor, too, have justice. His voice is cloaked with truth. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus identified with the marginalized, the sinners and the poor: this is the same justice that Wisdom mediates in Proverbs. Jesus called out leaders who abused or perpetuated injustices.

In Isaiah, nature itself is changed by the reign of the wise and righteous Christ. Predator and prey lie side by side. This is a hope for a world completely reset, a world as it was intended to be, a world of peace on every level and extending to every nation. The hope of Jesus is the banner of salvation for all people, not just the Jews and those who today call themselves Christian. Remember the dual ancestry of Jesse. Later in the Christmas story (Epiphany), we see both Judean Shepherds and Gentile Wise men pay homage, one guided by an Angel and the other by a star. All God's people are welcome at the crossroads of the crib. Wisdom is the

This Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, may we prepare his coming. Therefore let us pray that God, through the Holy Spirit may prepare a holy house for Christ in our hearts, hospitable and understanding of all others, and therefore fit for his eternal dwelling, so that we may truly welcome this Wisdom who brings us out of darkness into the light of life.

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Resources:

(1) Devotions for Advent 2020: A light in the Darkness by Kevin O'Brien
(2) (2) https://politicaltheology.com/wisdoms-place-in-the-creation/



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.