

ISAIAH 11:1-10

ST JAMES', 8.12.19, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

It can be amazingly difficult to kill off a tree or shrub! Back in Liverpool, there was a buddleia bush growing right outside the front of our house. It was causing problems because its roots were blocking the soil pipe from the downstairs toilet.

But buddleias are very difficult to kill! We had to cut it down, leaving a stump. Then we had to drill into the stump and put poison into the holes, tie a black plastic bag over the stump, and leave it for several months. Only then could we dig out the remaining roots, knowing that the plant was dead, and wouldn't be shooting back up again!

Isaiah uses the imagery of a shoot growing from a tree stump at the beginning of this passage. He's just been prophesying the destruction of the land by an invading army from Assyria. The OT people of God had been so disobedient, so unfaithful to their Lord, that he'd determined to punish them: *I send [the Assyrian] against a godless nation . . . against a people who anger me*, the Lord says in 10:6.

But the Lord won't be angry for ever. Later in chapter 10, we read this: *Very soon my anger against you will end* (10:25). So here in chapter 11, Isaiah's assuring the people that though they'll be down, they won't be out; new life will spring forth; *a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse*. Isaiah goes on to describe this new king's qualifications, his

performance, and the impact of his rule. So let's look at each of those in turn:

MESSIAH'S QUALIFICATIONS

In the first two verses, Isaiah outlines what will qualify this new king to rule over God's people. The most obvious qualification is that he'll be descended from David. Jesse was David's father, and in 9:7 and 16:5, Isaiah makes it clear that he understands Messiah to be descended from David.

David was seen by the people of Israel as the ideal king, whose rule was the golden age. The Lord had promised that his throne would last forever, and so it was important that any new king was descended from David. But here Isaiah is going further: Messiah will be a *shoot . . . from the stump of Jesse*, not just descended from David, but another David. So, like David, this new king would come from a peasant family. And although his ancestry is important, it isn't be the primary factor in qualifying him for kingship. That comes in verse 2 of this passage.

The primary factor which will qualify this new king for his role is *the spirit of the LORD*; what will set him apart is the very breath of God. Every aspect of his leadership will reflect supernatural wisdom and understanding. He won't just know about God; *the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD [will rest on him]* - and he will delight in the fear of the LORD (vv 2-3). In other words, this new king will have a close personal relationship with the Lord. That's what will make the difference: without God's spirit, each of us, whether peasant or king, ultimately lives for our own gratification. Only someone who knows

God intimately, someone whose chief aim in life is to please God, can truly and fully put aside their own interests and *delight in the fear of the LORD*.

Having outlined the new king's qualifications to rule,

MESSIAH'S PERFORMANCE

In verses 3 to 5, Isaiah describes the way in which he'll carry out his rule. Firstly, the negative: *He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or . . . by what he hears with his ears* (v 3). Kings have responsibility for judging in disputes. Human kings have to do that on the basis of what they see and hear; they have to make judgment calls as to the truthfulness of witnesses, and the honesty of plaintiffs. But somehow, this *new king* will be able to go deeper; he'll have the supernatural ability to tell the difference between the way things appear and the way they really are; and he'll judge accordingly.

After the negative, the positive: *with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth* (v 4). In most political systems, the problem of the poor is that they have no power. Rulers usually rely on the favour and goodwill of the rich and powerful, which means that the rights of the poor are often trampled in favour of the privileges of the rich. Not so under this new king! His authority doesn't depend on staying in favour with the rich and powerful, so he can judge the poor fairly without fear of the consequences. Under his rule, justice will be even-handed: in making judgments, he won't take account of people's bank balance, nor of their political influence.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked (v 4b). This new king's freedom from the need to curry favour with the rich and powerful means that he has the freedom to tell it like it is. His word is law; it has the power to enforce justice. *He will slay the wicked because righteousness will be his belt, and faithfulness the sash round his waist* (vv 4b,5).

The picture of this new king which Isaiah is painting shows someone who's not simply another human king. Even the best of men are flawed; a man who is merely a man wouldn't be able to wield such absolute power without being corrupted. This new king is human – he's descended from King David – but he's more than human, he's even more than the ideal human king.

But before we think more about the identity of this new king, let's think about what Isaiah writes about the impact of his rule, what his kingdom will look like:

MESSIAH'S RESULTS

The impact of this rule of *righteousness* and *justice* will be universal peace. Isaiah describes three specific facets: 1) old hostilities will be reconciled – *wolves* will no longer attack *lambs*, nor *leopards* hunt *goats*; 2) there will be a change of nature, so that predators like *bears* and *lions* start eating the same food as *cows*; 3) the curse which resulted from the Fall will be lifted. In Genesis 3, the Lord God decreed that human offspring would crush the snake's head, and that the snake would bite their heel. Here in Isaiah 11, we read: *the infant will play*

near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest (v 8).

Verse 9 summarises, and explains, this picture of Eden restored:

*They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

In other words, people throughout the world will know God. The impact of his rule will mean that peace will reign throughout the world. People throughout the world will enjoy knowing and loving the Lord God of Israel. Isaiah rounds off his poem in verse 10, emphasizing that this future reign of peace and justice isn't just for the OT people of God: *the nations will rally to [the Root of Jesse], and his place of rest will be glorious* – citizenship of this new kingdom is open to anyone and everyone.

CONCLUSION

This wonderful vision of a future kingdom of justice, integrity, peace and the knowledge and love of God leaves us with a problem. As Christians, we believe that this *new king*, descended from Jesse through David, anointed with the Holy Spirit, ruling with justice and integrity, causing peace to break out throughout the world – we believe that this new king is Jesus Christ. But as Simon Schama put it in his TV series 'Story of the Jews', the problem with believing that Messiah

has come, is that nothing has changed¹. We don't live in this restored Eden, where wolves dwell with lambs, and lions eat straw.

Jesus Christ clearly fulfills the qualifications for the new king whom Isaiah describes here. He's descended from David, from similar humble origins, anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus also clearly fulfills the criteria for the new king's performance. During his life on earth, he showed what it means to live in a close relationship with God, putting aside his own interests and *finding pleasure in obeying* the Lord. Jesus also showed unique insight into the messy circumstances of people's lives, and gave the blessing of God's acceptance to the most unexpected people: examples include the woman at the well; the woman with the flow of blood; the Roman centurion; tax collectors; lepers; fishermen; zealots. He never judged by appearance or hearsay, and he specialised in defending the rights of the helpless.

But it's hard to see how the impact of Jesus' rule fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. The answer given in the New Testament is that Jesus' rule or reign began when he lived among us on earth 2,000 years ago. Those of us who've accepted Jesus' rule or reign in our lives do experience an amazing sense of peace, which is a foretaste of the universal peace described in this passage. As citizens of Jesus' kingdom, we can put an end to old hostilities; we can see human nature changed by the work of the Holy Spirit in people's hearts and minds and lives. And so we can look forward to the full impact of Jesus' rule as king, when he returns to earth as he himself promised that he will.

In the meantime, we have a challenge. Under God, we're called to do all we can to make Jesus' rule or reign a reality. That means obeying his commands, and it means praying and working for our family, friends and neighbours who haven't accepted his kingship in their lives. It means doing all we can to defend the rights of the helpless, all we can to promote justice and integrity, all we can to speed the arrival of the day when *the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea* (v 9).

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/story-jews/video/episode-2/>