

How and why is the Advent hope a Messianic hope? To get to the bottom of this question, let us listen to St. Paul's answer in today's Epistle: '*the mystery is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles*'.

Paul regards the Old Testament as prophetic writings. And today's Old Testament reading is indeed a mystery. King David wanted to build a temple for Yahweh, instead he received a promise of an eternal kingdom. One may say it is rather a delightful business deal!

A young woman's pregnancy is quite normal, whether she is a virgin is beside the point. What is a mystery is that Mary is being told she has become the temporary dwelling-place of the living God. The presence of the Holy Spirit and the 'overshadowing' of the Most High, in other words, the Temple, would be existing in her womb! So what David wanted to build has become flesh and blood in the womb of Mary!

To unlock this profound mystery, we have to understand how and why the eager expectation of Israel looked forward to a time of fulfilment. That is the coming of God's royal agent - the Messiah, Yahweh's promise to David. However, from a historical point of view, let us ask these questions: Did God intend to have a king? If so, why did not Samuel, and before him so many judges, become kings? 1 Samuel 8 informs Bible readers that it was the Israelites who desired to have a king, just like their neighbouring nations. Likewise, did God intend to have a temple? Rather it was the king's desire to build a temple, just like other nations' national temples. And when the kings became corrupt, beginning with David, the whole nation eventually was exiled. Likewise, the temple, instead of God's dwelling place, became an idol, as Jeremiah denounced. The outcome was ruin.

And yet it was in adversity and also in their unshakeable faith in Yahweh that the Israelites looked forward to fulfilment of God's promise of the Messiah. It takes a long time for Israel to come to understand the king and the temple cannot represent the living and loving God dwelling in their midst. Gradually that expectation came to be concentrated in the figure of one person truly reflecting God's image, who came to be known as the Messiah, the anointed one. He is a Man after God's own heart.

In the life of Israel, kingship played a very significant role. Each king was an anointed one, a Christ in his own right. Yet even the people of Israel knew that none was able to show to be a perfect King. For some David was the great ideal of the past - yet David had most grievously sinned; for others, 'Solomon in all his glory' - yet Solomon's reign had proved so grievously oppressed that, at his death, the great majority of his subjects rebelled against his successor. And so the ideal of 'the Branch' - the One who would be substance and not shadow, in whose time righteousness without qualification would be achieved, always hung before the eyes of the people of Israel.

Today's Epistle reading is the concluding words of Paul's greatest writing - the book of Romans. This book should be classified as one of the greatest literary works in human civilization. It explains to us God's royal agent, the Messiah, after all is indeed a human figure, but it is a mystery hidden long ago and only disclosed in Jesus.

Nevertheless, Paul the Apostle, writing to the Gentiles, did not dismiss his Jewish root completely. As he wrote: *'the mystery is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles'* - that is to the whole human race and not just to the Jews. In other words, Paul's understanding of the Jewish Bible - the Old Testament - gives him a different idea who the royal agent is.

Paul recognizes the Old Testament as prophetic writings, but he does not specify which book contains the promise of the coming Messiah; let us do the guesswork together. I can assure you it will be quite rewarding. In our Christmas Nine Lessons and Carols service, one of the Old Testament passages we will read is Isaiah 11:1-9. This is a classic text on Messianic hope, the expectation of the Coming King.

A descendant of the great King David would receive God's spirit and would be a truly just and caring ruler of his people. Most religious Jews still think that this prophecy has not been fulfilled; but Paul thinks otherwise. The King of Peace has already come and received His sovereignty in the person of Jesus.

However, as we turn to the second part of the reading, we come to a very serious problem. For lions cannot eat straw like cattle. We would say this is anti-natural, just like we describe someone who does weird things as anti-

social. The preying of animals upon other animals is a necessary part of the natural world. Look at what has happened here in Australia where there are no natural enemies of the rabbit. Few animals in the wild survive into old age, but rabbits have lived their lives while they were healthy and bounding in energy. They are not only anti-natural but really have become anti-social to farmers.

So how would we understand this part of the prophecy? Nowadays we don't come across wild animals in our daily life. But in ancient Israel, life for the peasant was a struggle against the wild animals as well as against drought and weeds. Now during this Christmas holiday we are anxious of dangers on the road, but ancient people were anxious of meeting dangerous animals like lions, bears and snakes. Therefore, it is interesting to note in the Old Testament that there is this promise of the future in which wild animals will be removed from the land.

Instead of driving the wild animals away, or even killing them off, the prophet looks for the time when human beings and animals will become friends, and the animals will no longer prey on one another. *'They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.'*

How would you react to this idea? The supermarket owners would certainly hope that this will never happen because if that had happened they would suffer a great loss from selling animal foods. However, if you present this idea to them, they will simply laugh you off. They probably think that this idea is at best no more than a fantasy world of Santa Claus and Peter Pan.

Is that really what you think?

I think not. I believe this is a prophecy and which will surely happen one day. A mystery will be revealed. And I believe that for two reasons.

First, the passage before us is a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah, but it is really a promise of the coming of the Messiah in two stages if you like. The first five verses have already come true in the first Christmas, in the birth of Jesus Christ. Now if this first part of God's promise has come true, then there isn't any reason we should doubt that the Messiah will come again. The last five verses tell us of what will happen when the Messiah comes again in the future. Christmas time is a time we should really think big. John's Gospel says, 'God so loves the world...' and the Apostle Paul says, 'God was

reconciling the world to himself.' Of course we human beings are part of the world, but we are not of the world. In this prophecy we see a vision of paradise restored. This may go beyond what is possible biologically at present; but as I say, we have no reason to doubt that it will never come true because, as we believe, the Messiah has already come once and therefore He will come again to fulfil the entire promise.

Secondly, there are all sorts of organizations, be they political, humanist or environmental which have a common goal for the betterment of the world. I don't want you to think that I am against these or that Christianity is anti-harmony. I am against them because I believe they present a world in which it has become an object of worship. We have a mission to the world and to all nations. The word 'Christian' derives from Latin meaning the "servant of the Anointed One." In the absence of the Christ, we His servants become ourselves 'alter Christus', a second Anointed One. The reason we can say that is because we believe we have also received the Holy Spirit as Christ Himself said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.' Our King has given us the terrible and exhilarating responsibility to make this prophecy come true to everyone and to the world. If those pressure groups use political or other fashionable means to make the world a better place to live, let us remind ourselves on the eve of Christmas, this prophecy of Isaiah gives us a better understanding of the real world to come. We are totally committed to bringing it about through the power of the Holy Spirit who gives birth to the Messiah through a virgin's womb.